

~~As she sees him diving and gasping for breath,
She clings to him and shrieks, white behind her
Soldiers put their spears into her shoulders and back,
And as they lead her away into slavery,
Her tear-drenched face is a mark of pain.~~

~~So too Odysseus, pithful in his grief,
He managed to conceal his tears from everyone
Except Alcinous, who sat at his elbow
And could not help but hear his heavy sighs.
Alcinous acted quickly and said to his guests:~~

~~"Leave me, Phaeacian counselors and lords—
Demodocus should stop playing his lyre.
His song is not pleasing to everyone here.
Ever since dinner began and the divine bard
Rose up to sing, our guest has not ceased
From lamentation. He is overcome with grief.
Let the lyre stop. It is better if we all
Host and guest alike can enjoy the feast.
At that we are doing we are doing on behalf
Of the revered stranger, providing him
With passage home and gifts of friendship.
As strangers and suppliants to us, let us be a brother
To anyone with even an ounce of good sense—
So there is no need, stranger, for you to withhold
What I am about to ask for; no need to be crafty
Or think of gain. Better to speak the plain truth.
Tell me your name, the one you were known by
To your mother and father and your people back home.
No one is nameless, rich man or poor.
Pancrus gave names to all of their children
When they were born. And tell me your country
Your city, and your land, so that our ships
May take you there, finding their way by their ruse.
For Phaeacian ships do not have pilots,
Nor steering oars, as other ships have.~~

~~They know on their own their passengers' thoughts,
And know all the cities and rich fields in the world.
And they sense the great gulls with the greatest speed,
Hidden in mist and fog, with never a fear
Of damage or shipwreck.~~

~~But I remember hearing
My father, Nestor here, say how Poseidon
Was angry with us because we always give
Safe passage to men. He said that one day
Poseidon would send a Phaeacian ship
As it sailed back home over the misty sea,
And would wreck it over city within a mountain.
The old man used to say that, and since the god
Will bring it to pass or not as suits his pleasure,
But tell me this, and tell me the truth.~~

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~~Where have you wandered, to what lands?
Tell me about the people and cities you saw,
Which ones are cruel and without right and wrong,
And which are godfearing and kind to strangers.
And tell me why you weep and grieve at heart
When you hear the fate of the Greeks and Trojans.
This was the gods' doing. They spun that fate
So that in later times it would turn into song.
But some kinsman of yours die at Troy,
A good, loyal man, your daughter's husband
Or your wife's father, someone near and dear,
Or perhaps even a relative by blood?
Or was it a comrade, tired and true?
A friend like that is no less than a brother."~~

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BOOK IX

And Odysseus, his great mind teeming:

"My Lord Alcinous, what could be finer
Than listening to a singer of tales
Such a Demodocus, with a voice like a god's?
Nothing we do is sweeter than this—
A cheerful gathering of all the people
Sitting side by side throughout the halls,
Feasting and listening to a singer of tales,
The tables filled with food and drink,
The server drawing wine from the bowl
And bringing it around to fill our cups.
For me, this is the finest thing in the world.
But you have a mind to draw out of me
My pain and sorrow, and make me feel it again.
Where should I begin, where end my story?
Heaven has sent me many tribulations.
I will tell you my name first, so that you, too,
Will know who I am, and when I escape
The day of my doom, I will always be
Your friend and host, though my home is far.
I am Odysseus, great Laertes' son,
Known for my cunning throughout the world,
And my fame reaches even to heaven.
My native land is Ithaca, a sunlit island
With a forested peak called Nertion,
Visible for miles. Many other islands
Lie close around her—Doulchion, Samé,
And wooded Zacynthus—off toward the sunrise,
But Ithaca lies low on the evening horizon,
A rugged place, a good nurse of men.
No sight is sweeter to me than Ithaca. Yes,
Calypso, the beautiful goddess, kept me
In her caverns, yearning to possess me;
And Circe, the witch of Aeaea, held me

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In her halls and yearned to possess me;
But they could not persuade me or touch my heart.

Nothing is sweeter than your own country

And your own parents, not even living in a rich house—

Not if it's far from family and home.

But let me tell you of the hard journey homeward

Zeus sent me on when I sailed from Troy.

From Ilium the wind took me to the Cicones

In Ismaros, pillaged the town and killed the men.

The women and treasure that we took out

I divided as fairly as I could among all hands

And then gave the command to pull out fast.

That was my order, but the fools wouldn't listen.

They drank a lot of wine and slaughtered

A lot of sheep and cattle on the shore.

Some of the town's survivors got away inland

And called their kinsmen. There were more of them,

And they were braver, too, men who knew how to fight

From chariots and on foot. They came on as thick

As leaves and flowers in spring, attacking

At dawn. We were out of luck, cursed by Zeus

To suffer heavy losses. The battle-lines formed

Along our beached ships, and bronze spears

Sliced through the air. As long as the day's heat

Climbed toward noon, we held our ground

Against superior numbers. But when the sun

Dipped down, the Cicones beat us down, too.

We lost six fighting men from each of our ships.

The rest of us cheated destiny and death.

We sailed on in shock, glad to get out alive

But grieving for our lost comrades.

I wouldn't let the ships get under way

Until someone had called out three times

For each mate who had fallen on the battlefield.

And then Zeus hit us with a norther,

A freak hurricane. The clouds blotted out

Land and sea, and night climbed up the sky.

The ships pitched ahead. When their sails

Began to shred in the gale-force winds,

We lowered them and stowed them aboard.

Fearing the worst, and rowed hard for the mainland.

We lay offshore two miserable days and nights.

When Dawn combed her hair in the third day's light,

We set up the masts, hoisted the white sails,

And took our seats. The wind and the helmsmen

Steered the ships, and I would have made it home

Unscathed, but as I was rounding Cape Malea

The waves, the current, and wind from the North

Drove me off course past Cythera Island

Nine days of bad winds blew us across
The teeming seas. On the tenth day we came

To the land of the Lotus-Eaters

We went ashore,

And the crews lost no time in drawing water

And preparing a meal beside their ships.

After they had filled up on food and drink,

I sent out a team—two picked men and a herald—

To reconnoiter and sound out the locals.

They headed out and made contact with the Lotus-Eaters,

Who meant no harm but did give my men

Some lotus to eat. Whoever ate that sweet fruit

Lost the will to report back, preferring instead

To stay there, munching lotus, oblivious of home.

I hauled them back waiting to the ships,

All hands to board their ships on the double

Before anyone else tasted the lotus.

They were aboard in no time and at their benches,

Churning the sea white with their oars.

We sailed on, our morale sinking,

And we came to the land of the Cyclopes,

Lawless savages who leave everything

Up to the gods. These people neither plow nor plant,

But everything grows for them unsown:

Wheat, barley, and vines that bear

Clusters of grapes, watered by rain from Zeus.

They have no assemblies or laws but live

In high mountain caves, ruling their own

Children and wives and ignoring each other.

A fertile island slants across the harbor's mouth,

Neither very close nor far from the Cyclopes' shore.

It's well-wooded and populated with innumerable

Wild goats, uninhibited by human traffic.

Not even hunters go there, tramping through the woods

And roughing it on the mountainsides.

It pastures no flocks, has no tilled fields—

Unplowed, unsown, virgin forever, hereft

Of men, all it does is support those bleating goats.

The Cyclopes do not sail and have no craftsmen

To build them benches, red-prowed ships

That could supply all their wants, crossing the sea

To other cities, visiting each other as other men do.

These same craftsmen would have made this island

Into a good settlement. It's not a bad place at all

And would bear everything in season. Meadows

Lie by the seashore, lush and soft,

Where vines would thrive. It has level plowland

With deep, rich soil that would produce bumper crops

Season after season. The harbor's good, too,
No need for moorings, anchor-stones, or tying up.
Just beach your ship until the wind is right
And you're ready to sail. At the harbor's head
A spring flows clear and bright from a cave
Surrounded by poplars.

135

There we sailed in,
Some god guiding us through the murky night.
We couldn't see a thing. A thick fog
Enveloped the ships, and the moon
Wasn't shining in the cloud-covered sky.
None of us could see the island, or the long waves
Rolling toward the shore, until we ran our ships
Onto the sandy beach. Then we lowered sail,
Disembarked, and fell asleep on the sand.

145

Dawn came early, with palmettoes of rose,
And we explored the island, marveling at it.
The spirit-women, daughters of Zeus,
Roused the mountain goats so that my men
Could have a meal. We ran to the ships,
Got our javelins and bows, formed three groups
And started to shoot. The god let us bag our game,
Nine goats for each of the twelve ships,
Except for my ship, which got ten.

150

So all day long until the sun went down
We feasted on meat and sweet wine.
The ships had not yet run out of the dark red
Each crew had taken aboard in large jars
When we ransacked the Cicones' sacred city.
And we looked across at the Cyclopes' land.
We could see the smoke from their fires
And hear their voices, and their sheep and goats.
When the sun set, and darkness came on
We went to sleep on the shore of the sea.
As soon as dawn brightened in the rosy sky,
I assembled all the crews and spoke to them:

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'The rest of you will stay here while I go
With my ship and crew on reconnaissance.
I want to find out what those men are like,
Wild savages with no sense of right or wrong
Or hospitable folk who fear the gods.'

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With that, I boarded ship and ordered my crew
To get on deck and cast off. They took their places
And were soon whitening the sea with their oars.
As we pulled in over the short stretch of water,
There on the shoreline we saw a high cave
Overhung with laurels. It was a place
Where many sheep and goats were penned at night.

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Around it was a yard fenced in by stones
Set deep in the earth, and by tall pines and crowned oaks.
This was the lair of a huge creature, a man
Who pastured his flocks off by himself,
And lived apart from others and knew no law.
He was a freak of nature, not like men who eat bread
But like a lone wooded crag high in the mountains.

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I ordered part of my crew to stay with the ship
And counted off the twelve best to go with me.
I took along a goatskin filled with red wine,
A sweet vintage I had gotten from Maron,
Apollo's priest on Ismaros, when I spared both him
And his wife and child out of respect for the god.
He lived in a grove of Phoebeus Apollo
And gave me splendid gifts: seven bars of gold,
A solid-silver bowl, and twelve jars of wine,
Sweet and pure, a drink for the gods.
Hardly anyone in his house, none of the servants,
Knew about this wine—just Maron, his wife,
And a single housekeeper. Whenever he drank
This sweet dark red wine, he would fill one goblet
And pour it into twenty parts of water,
And the bouquet that spread from the mixing bowl
Was so fragrant no one could hold back from drinking.
I had a large skin of this wine, a sack
Of provisions—and a strong premonition
That we had a rendezvous with a man of great might,
A savage with no notion of right and wrong.

205

We got to the cave quickly. He was out,
Tending his flocks in the rich pastureland.
We went inside and had a good look around.
There were crates stuffed with cheese, and pens
Crammed with lambs and kids—firstlings,
Middlings, and newborns in separate sections.
The vessels he used for milking—pails and bowls
Of good workmanship—were brimming with whey.
My men thought we should make off with some cheese
And then come back for the lambs and kids,
Load them on board, and sail away on the sea.
But I wouldn't listen. It would have been far better
If I had! But I wanted to see him, and see
If he would give me a gift of hospitality.
When he did come he was not a welcome sight.

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We lit a fire and offered sacrifice
And helped ourselves to some of the cheese.
Then we sat and waited in the cave
Until he came back, herding his flocks.
He carried a huge load of dry wood

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To make a fire for his supper and heaved it down
With a crash inside the cave. We were terrified
And scurried back into a corner.

He drove his fat flocks into the wide cavern,
At least those that he milked, leaving the males—
The rams and the goats—outside in the yard.

Then he lifted up a great doorstone,
A huge slab of rock, and set it in place.

Two sturdy wagons—twenty sturdy wagons—
Couldn't pry it from the ground—that's how big
The stone was he set in the doorway. Then,

He sat down and milked the ewes and bleating goats,
All in good order, and put the sucklings
Beneath their mothers. Half of the white milk

He curdled and scooped into wicker baskets,
The other half he let stand in the pails
So he could drink it later for his supper.

He worked quickly to finish his chores,
And as he was lighting the fire he saw us and said:

'Who are you strangers? Sailing the seas, huh?
Where from, and what for? Pirates, probably,
Roaming around causing people trouble.'

He spoke, and it hit us like a punch in the gut—
His booming voice and the sheer size of the monster—
But even so I found the words to answer him:

'We are Greeks, blown off course by every wind
In the world on our way home from Troy, traveling
Sea routes we never meant to, by Zeus' will no doubt.

We are proud to be the men of Agamemnon,
Son of Atreus, the greatest name under heaven,
Conqueror of Troy, destroyer of armies.

Now we are here, suppliants at your knees,
Hoping you will be generous to us
And give us the gifts that are due to strangers.

Respect the gods, sir. We are your suppliants,
And Zeus avenges strangers and suppliants,
Zeus, god of strangers, who walks at their side.'

He answered me from his pitiless heart:

You're dumb, stranger, or from far away,
If you ask me to fear the gods. Cyclopes
Don't care about Zeus or his aegis

Or the blessed gods, since we are much stronger.
I wouldn't spare you or your men
Out of fear of Zeus. I would spare them only
If I myself wanted to. But tell me,

Where did you leave your ship? Fear
Down the coast, or close? I'd like to know.'

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Nice try, but I knew all the tricks and said:

'My ship? Poseidon smashed it to pieces
Against the rocks at the border of your land.
He pushed her in close and the wind did the rest.
These men and I escaped by the skin of our teeth.'

This brought no response from his pitiless heart
But a sudden assault upon my men. His hands
Reached out, seized two of them, and smashed them

To the ground like puppies. Their brains splattered out
And oozed into the dirt. He tore them limb from limb
To make his supper, gulping them down

Like a mountain lion, leaving nothing behind—
Guts, flesh, or marrowy bones.

Crying out, we lifted our hands to Zeus
At this outrage, bewildered and helpless.

When the Cyclops had filled his huge belly
With human flesh, he washed it down with milk,
Then stretched out in his cave among his flocks.

I crept up close and was thinking about
Drawing my sharp sword and driving it home
Into his chest where the lungs hide the liver.

I was feeling for the spot when another thought
Checked my hand: we would die to a man in that cave,
Unable to budge the enormous stone

He had set in place to block the entrance. And so,
Groaning through the night, we waited for dawn.

As soon as dawn came, streaking the sky red,
He rekindled the fire and milked his flocks,
All in good order, placing the sucklings

Beneath their mothers. His chores done,
He seized two of my men and made his meal.
After he had fed he drove his flocks out,

Easily lifting the great stone, which he then set
Back in place as lightly as if he were setting
A lid upon a quiver. And then, with loud whistling,

The Cyclops turned his fat flocks toward the mountain,
And I was left there, brooding on how
I might make him pay and win glory from Athena.

This was the best plan I could come up with:

Beside one of the sheep pens lay a huge pole
Of green olive which the Cyclops had cut
To use as a walking stick when dry. Looking at it

We guessed it was about as large as the mast
Of a black ship, a twenty-oared, broad-beamed
Freighter that crosses the wide gulfs.

That's how long and thick it looked. I cut off

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About a fathom's length from this pole
 And handed it over to my men. They scraped it
 And made it smooth, and I sharpened the tip
 And took it over to the fire and hardened it.
 Then I hid it, setting it carefully in the dung
 That lay in piles all around the cave.
 And I told my men to draw straws to decide
 Which of them would have to share the risk with me—
 Lift that stake and grind it in his eye
 While he was asleep. They drew straws and came up with
 The very men I myself would have chosen.
 There were four of them, and I made five.

At evening he came, herding his fleecy sheep.
 He drove them straight into the cave, drove in
 All his flocks in fact. Maybe he had some
 Foreboding, or maybe some god told him to.
 Then he lifted the doorstone and set it in place,
 And sat down to milk the goats and bleating ewes,
 All in good order, setting the sucklings
 Beneath their mothers. His chores done,
 Again he seized two of my men and made his meal
 Then I went up to the Cyclops and spoke to him,
 Holding an ivy-wood bowl filled with dark wine.

'Cyclops, have some wine, now that you have eaten
 Your human flesh, so you can see what kind of drink
 Was in our ship's hold. I was bringing it to you
 As an offering, hoping you would pity me
 And help me get home. But you are a raving
 Maniac! How do you expect any other man
 Ever to visit you after acting like this?'

He took the bowl and drank it off, relishing
 Every last, sweet drop. And he asked me for more:

'Be a pal and give me another drink. And tell me
 Your name, so I can give you a gift you'll like.
 Wine grapes grow in the Cyclopes' land, too.
 Rain from the sky makes them grow from the earth.
 But this—this is straight ambrosia and nectar.'

So I gave him some more of the ruby-red wine.
 Three times the fool drained the bowl dry,
 And when the wine had begun to work on his mind,
 I spoke these sweet words to him:

'Cyclops,
 You ask me my name, my glorious name,
 And I will tell it to you. Remember now,

To give me the gift just as you promised.
 Noman is my name. They call me Noman⁷—
 My mother, my father, and all my friends, too.'

He answered me from his pitiless heart:

'Noman I will eat last after his friends.
 Friends first, him last. That's my gift to you.'

He listed as he spoke and then fell flat on his back,
 His thick neck bent sideways. He was sound asleep,
 Belching out wine and bits of human flesh
 In his drunken stupor. I swung into action,
 Thrusting the stake deep in the embers,
 Heating it up, and all the while talking to my men
 To keep up their morale. When the olivewood stake
 Was about to catch fire, green though it was,
 And was really glowing, I took it out

And brought it right up to him. My men
 Stood around me, and some god inspired us.
 My men lifted up the olivewood stake

And drove the sharp point right into his eye,
 While I, putting my weight behind it, spun it around
 The way a man bores a ship's beam with a drill.
 Leaning down on it while other men beneath him
 Keep it spinning and spinning with a leather strap.
 That's how we twirled the fiery-pointed stake
 In the Cyclops' eye. The blood formed a whirlpool
 Around its searing tip. His lids and brow

Were all singed by the heat from the burning eyeball
 And its roots crackled in the fire and hissed
 Like an axe-head or adze a smith dips into water
 When he wants to temper the iron—that's how his eye
 Sizzled and hissed around the olivewood stake.
 He screamed, and the rock walls rang with his voice.

We shrank back in terror while he wrenched
 The blood-grimed stake from his eye and flung it
 Away from him, blundering about and shouting
 To the other Cyclopes, who lived around him
 In caverns among the windswept crags.
 They heard his cry and gathered from all sides
 Around his cave and asked him what ailed him:

'Polyphemus, why are you hollering so much
 And keeping us up the whole blessed night?
 Is some man stealing your flocks from you,
 Or killing you, maybe, by some kind of trick?'

And Polyphemus shouted out to them:

7. In Greek, "Noman"—*oudeis*—sounds a little like *Odysseus*.

'Noman is killing me by some kind of trick!'

They sent their words winging back to him:

'If no man is hurting you, then your sickness
Comes from Zeus and can't be helped.
You should pray to your father, Lord Poseidon.'

They left then, and I laughed in my heart
At how my phony name had fooled them so well.

Cyclops meanwhile was groaning in agony.
Groping around, he removed the doorstone
And sat in the entrance with his hands spread out
To catch anyone who went out with the sheep—
As if I could be so stupid. I thought it over.
Trying to come up with the best plan I could
To get us all out from the jaws of death.
I wove all sorts of wiles, as a man will

When his life is on the line. My best idea
Had to do with the sheep that were there, big,
Thick-fleeced beauties with wool dark as violets.

Working silently, I bound them together
With willow branches the Cyclops slept on.
I bound them in threes. Each middle sheep
Carried a man underneath, protected by
The two on either side: three sheep to a man.
As for me, there was a ram, the best in the flock.
I grabbed his back and curled up beneath
His shaggy belly. There I lay, hands twined
Into the marvelous wool, hanging on for dear life.
And so, muffling our groans, we waited for dawn.

When the first streaks of red appeared in the sky,
The rams started to bolt toward the pasture.
The unmilked females were bleating in the pens,
Their udders bursting. Their master,
Worn out with pain, felt along the backs
Of all of the sheep as they walked by, the fool,
Unaware of the men under their fleecy chests.
The great ram headed for the entrance last,
Heavy with wool—and with me thinking hard.
Running his hands over the ram, Polyphemus said:

'My poor ram, why are you leaving the cave
Last of all? You've never lagged behind before.
You were always the first to reach the soft grass
With your big steps, first to reach the river,
First to want to go back to the yard
At evening. Now you're last of all. Are you sad
About your master's eye? A bad man blinded me,
Him and his nasty friends, getting me drunk,
Noman—but he's not out of trouble yet!

If only you understood and could talk,
You could tell me where he's hiding. I would
Smash him to bits and spatter his brains
All over the cave. Then I would find some relief
From the pain this no-good Noman has caused me.'

He spoke, and sent the ram off through the door.
When we had gone a little way from the cave,
I first untangled myself from the ram
And then untied my men. Then, moving quickly,
We drove those fat, long-shanked sheep
Down to the ship, keeping an eye on our rear.
We were a welcome sight to the rest of the crew.
But when they started to mourn the men we had lost
I forbade it with an upward nod of my head,
Signaling each man like that and ordering them
To get those fleecy sheep aboard instead.
On the double, and get the ship out to sea.
Before you knew it they were on their benches
Beating the sea to white froth with their oars.
When we were offshore but still within earshot,
I called out to the Cyclops, just to rub it in:

'So, Cyclops, it turns out it wasn't a coward
Whose men you murdered and ate in your cave,
You savage! But you got yours in the end.
Didn't you? You had the gall to eat the guests
In your own house, and Zeus made you pay for it.'

He was even angrier when he heard this.
Breaking off the peak of a huge crag
He threw it toward our ship, and it carried
To just in front of our dark prow. The sea
Billowed up where the rock came down,
And the backwash pushed us to the mainland again,
Like a flood tide setting us down at the shore.
I grabbed a long pole and shoved us off,
Nodding to the crew to fall on the oars
And get us out of there. They leaned into it,
And when we were twice as far out to sea as before
I called to the Cyclops again, with my men
Hanging all over me and begging me not to:

'Don't do it, man! The rock that hit the water
Pushed us in and we thought we were done for.
If he hears any sound from us, he'll heave
Half a cliff at us and crush the ship and our skulls
With one throw. You know he has the range.'

They tried, but didn't persuade my hero's heart—
I was really angry—and I called back to him:

Cyclops, if anyone, any mortal man,
Asks you how you got your eye put out,
Tell him that Odysseus the marauder did it,
Son of Laertes, whose home is on Ithaca.

He groaned, and had this to say in response:

'Oh no! Now it's coming to me, the old prophecy.
There was a seer here once, a tall handsome man,
Telemos Eurymides. He prophesied well
All his life to the Cyclopes. He told me
That all this would happen some day,
That I would lose my sight at Odysseus' hands.
I always expected a great hero
Would come here, strong as can be.
Now this puny, little, good-for-nothing runt
Has put my eye out—because he got me drunk.
But come here, Odysseus, so I can give you a gift,
And ask Poseidon to help you on your way.
I'm his son, you know. He claims he's my father.
He will heal me, if he wants. But none
Of the other gods will, and no mortal man will.'

He spoke, and I shouted back to him:

'I wish I were as sure of ripping out your lungs
And sending you to Hell as I am dead certain
That not even the Earthshaker will heal your eye.'

I had my say, and he prayed to Poseidon,
Stretching his arms out to starry heaven:

'Hear me, Poseidon, blue-maned Earth-Holder,
If you are the father you claim to be.
Grant that Odysseus, son of Laertes,
May never reach his home on Ithaca.
But if he is fated to see his family again,
And return to his home and own native land,
May he come late, having lost all companions,
In another's ship, and find trouble at home.'

He prayed, and the blue-maned sea-god heard him.
Then he broke off an even larger chunk of rock,
Pivoted, and threw it with incredible force.
It came down just behind our dark-hulled ship,
Barely missing the end of the rudder. The sea
Billowed up where the rock hit the water,
And the wave pushed us forward all the way
To the island where our other ships waited
Clustered on the shore, ringed by our comrades
Sitting on the sand, anxious for our return.

We beached the ship and unloaded the Cyclops' sheep,
Which I divided up as fairly as I could
Among all hands. The veterans gave me the great ram,
And I sacrificed it on the shore of the sea
To Zeus in the dark clouds, who rules over all.
I burnt the thigh pieces, but the god did not accept
My sacrifice, brooding over how to destroy
All my benched ships and my trusty crews.

So all the long day until the sun went down
We sat feasting on meat and drinking sweet wine.
When the sun set and darkness came on
We lay down and slept on the shore of the sea.
Early in the morning, when the sky was streaked red,
I roused my men and ordered the crews
To get on deck and cast off. They took their places
And were soon whitening the sea with their oars.

We sailed on in shock, glad to get away alive
But grieving for the comrades we had lost."

BOOK X

"We came next to the island of Aeolia.
Home of Aeolus, son of Hippotas,
Dear to the immortals. Aeolia
Is a floating island surrounded by a wall
Of indestructible bronze set on sheer stone.
Aeolus' twelve children live there with him,
Six daughters and six manly sons.
He married his daughters off to his boys,
And they all sit with their father and mother
Continually feasting on abundant good cheer
Spread out before them. Every day
The house is filled with steamy savor
And the courtyard resounds. Every night
The men sleep next to their high-born wives
On blankets strewn on their corded beds.
We came to their city and their fine palace,
And for a full month he entertained me.
He questioned me in great detail about Troy,
The Greek fleet, and the Greeks' return home.
I told him everything, from beginning to end.
And when I, in turn, asked if I might leave
And requested him to send me on my way,
He did not refuse, and this was his send-off:
He gave me a bag made of the hide of an ox
Nine years old, which he had skinned himself,
And in this bag he bound the wild winds' ways,
For Zeus had made him keeper of the winds.
To still or to rouse whichever he will.

He tied this bag down in the hold of my ship
With a bright silver cord, so that not a puff
Could escape. But he let the West Wind out
To blow my ships along and carry us home.
It was not to be. Our own folly undid us.

30

For nine days and nights we sailed on.

35

On the tenth day we raised land, our own
Native fields, and got so close we saw men
Tending their fires. Then sleep crept up on me,
Exhausted from minding the sail the whole time
By myself. I wouldn't let any of my crew
Spell me, because I wanted to make good time.
As soon as I fell asleep, the men started to talk.

40

Saying I was bringing home for myself

Silver and gold as gifts from great Aeolus.

You can imagine the sort of things they said:

⁴⁷This guy gets everything wherever he goes.

45

First, he's freighting home his loot from Troy,
Beautiful stuff, while we, who made the same trip,
Are coming home empty-handed. And now
Aeolus has lavished these gifts upon him.
Let's have a quick look, and see what's here,
How much gold and silver is stuffed in this bag.'

50

All malicious nonsense, but it won out in the end,
And they opened the bag. The winds rushed out
And bore them far out to sea, weeping
As their native land faded on the horizon.

55

When I woke up and saw what had happened
I thought long and hard about whether I should
Just go over the side and end it all in the sea

Or endure in silence and remain among the living.

In the end I decided to bear it and live.

60

I wrapped my head in my cloak and lay down on the deck
While an evil wind carried the ships
Back to Aeolia. My comrades groaned.

We went ashore and drew water
And the men took a meal beside the swift ships.
When we had tasted food and drink

65

I took a herald and one man

And went to Aeolus' glorious palace.

I found him feasting with his wife and children,

And when we came in and sat on the threshold

They were amazed and questioned me:

70

'What happened, Odysseus? What evil spirit
Abused you? Surely we sent you off

With all you needed to get back home
Or anywhere else your heart desired.'

75

I answered them from the depths of my sorrow:

'My evil crew ruined me, that and stubborn sleep,
But make it right, friends, for you have the power.'

I made my voice soft and tried to persuade them,
But they were silent. And then their father said:

80

'Be gone from this island instantly!

You are the most cursed of all living things.

It would go against all that is right

For me to help or send on his way

A man so despised by the blessed gods.

Be gone! You are cursed by heaven!

85

And with that he sent me from his house,
Groaning heavily. We sailed on from there
With grief in our hearts. Because of our folly
There was no breeze to push us along,
And our morale sank because the rowing was hard.
We sailed on for six solid days and nights,
And on the seventh we came to land,
The lofty city of Telemus

90

In the land of the Laestrygonians.

95

Where a herdsman driving in his flocks at dusk
Calls to another driving his out at dawn.

A man could earn a double wage there
If he never slept, one by herding cattle

And another by pasturing white sheep,
For night and day make one twilight there.

The harbor we came to is a glorious place,
Surrounded by sheer cliffs. Headlands

100

jut out on either side to form a narrow mouth,
And there all the others steered in their ships
And moored them close together in the bay.

No wave, large or small, ever rocks a boat
In that silvery calm. I alone moored my black ship

105

Outside the harbor, tying her up
On the rocks that lie on the border of the land.

Then I climbed to a rugged lookout point
And surveyed the scene. There was no sign

110

Of plowed fields, only smoke rising up from the land.

I sent out a team—two picked men and a herald—
To reconnoiter and find out who lived there.
They went ashore and followed a smooth road

115

Used by wagons to bring wood from the mountains
Down to the city. In front of the city

They met a girl drawing water. Her father

Εὐτ' Ἀόκαμος = with goodly locks, fair-haired

Was named Antiphates and she had come down
To the flowing spring Artacia,
From which they carried water to the town.
When my men came up to her and asked her
Who the people there were and who was their king,
She showed them her father's high-roofed house.
They entered the house and found his wife inside,
A woman, to their horror, as huge as a mountain top.
At once she called her husband, Antiphates,
Who meant business when he came. He seized
One of my men and made him into dinner.
The other two got out of there and back to the ships,
But Antiphates had raised a cry throughout the city,
And when they heard it, the Laestrygonians
Came up on all sides, thousands of them,
Not like men but like the Sons of the Earth,
The Giants.⁸ They pelted us from the cliffs
With rocks too large for a man to lift.
The sounds that came from the ships were sickening,
Sounds of men dying and boats being crushed.
The Laestrygonians speared the bodies like fish,
And carried them back for their ghastly meal.
While this was happening I drew my sword
And cut the cables of my dark-prowed ship,
Barking out orders for the crew to start rowing
And get us out of there. They rowed for their lives,
Ripping the sea, and my ship sped joyfully
Out and away from the beetling rocks,
But all of the others were destroyed as they lay.

We sailed on in shock, glad to get out alive
But grieving for the comrades we'd lost.
And I came to Aeaea, the island that is home
To Circe, a dread goddess with richly coiled hair
And a human voice. She is the sister
Of dark-hearted Aeetes and they are both sprung
From Helios and Perse, daughter of Ocean.⁹
Some god guided us into a harbor
And we put in to shore without a sound.
We disembarked and lay there for two days and two nights,
Eating our hearts out with weariness and grief.
But when Dawn combed her hair in the third day's light,
I took my sword and spear and went up
From the ship to open ground, hoping to see
Plowed fields, and to hear human voices.
So I climbed to a rugged lookout point
And surveyed the scene. What I saw was smoke

8. The Giants were children of Earth, fertilized by the blood of Uranus after his castration.
9. Perse is one of the many daughters of Ocean; Aeetes was the cruel king of Colchis, owner of the Golden Fleece and father of Medea.

Rising up from Circe's house. It curled up high
Through the thick brush and woods, and I wondered
Whether I should go and have a closer look.
I decided it was better to go back to the ship
And give my crew their meal, and then
Send out a party to reconnoiter.
I was on my way back and close to the ship
When some god took pity on me,
Walking there alone, and sent a great antlered stag
Right into my path. He was on his way
Down to the river from his pasture in the woods,
Thirsty and hot from the sun beating down,
And as he came out I got him right on the spine
In the middle of his back. The bronze spear bored
All the way through, and he fell in the dust
With a groan, and his spirit flew away.
Planting my foot on him, I drew the bronze spear
Out of the wound and laid it down on the ground.
Then I pulled up a bunch of willow shoots
And twisted them together to make a rope
About a fathom long. I used this to tie
The stag's feet together so I could carry him
Across my back, leaning on my spear
As I went back to the ship. There was no way
An animal that large could be held on one shoulder.
I flung him down by the ship and roused my men,
Going up to each in turn and saying to them:

'We're not going down to Hades, my friends,
Before our time. As long as there is still
Food and drink in our ship, at least
We don't have to starve to death.'

When they heard this, they drew their cloaks
From their faces, and marveled at the size
Of the stag lying on the barren seashore.
When they had seen enough, they washed their hands
And prepared a glorious feast. So all day long
Until the sun went down we sat there feasting
On all that meat, washing it down with wine.
When the sun set and darkness came on,
We lay down to sleep on the shore of the sea.

When Dawn brushed the eastern sky with rose,
I called my men together and spoke to them:

'Listen to me, men. It's been hard going.
We don't know east from west right now,
But we have to see if we have any good ideas left.
We may not. I climbed up to a lookout point.
We're on an island, ringed by the endless sea.

The land lies low, and I was able to see
Smoke rising up through the brushy woods.'

215

This was too much for them. They remembered
What Antiphatas, the Laestrygonian, had done,
And how the Cyclops had eaten their comrades.
They wailed and cried but it did them no good.

220

I counted off the crew into two companies
And appointed a leader for each. Eurylochus
Headed up one group and I took the other,
And then we shook lots in a bronze helmet.
Out jumped the lot of Eurylochus, brave heart,
And so off he went, with twenty-two men,
All in tears, leaving us behind in no better mood.

225

They went through the woods and found Circe's house
In an upland clearing. It was built of polished stone
And surrounded by mountain lions and wolves,
Creatures Circe had drugged and bewitched.
These beasts did not attack my men, but stood
On their hind legs and wagged their long tails,

230

Like dogs fawning on their master who always brings
Treats for them when he comes home from a feast.
So these clawed beasts were fawning around my men,
Who were terrified all the same by the huge animals.

235

While they stood like this in the gateway
They could hear Circe inside, singing in a lovely voice
As she moved about weaving a great tapestry,
The unfading handiwork of an immortal goddess,
Finely woven, shimmering with grace and light.

240

Pollux, a natural leader, and of all the crew
He one I loved and trusted most, spoke up then:

'Someone inside is weaving a great web,
And singing so beautifully the floor thrums with the sound.
Whether it's a goddess or a woman, let's call her out now.'

245

And so they called to her, and she came out
And flung open the bright doors and invited them in.
They all filed in naively behind her,

250

Except Eurylochus, who suspected a trap.
When she had led them in and seated them
She brewed up a potion of Pramnian wine
With cheese, barley, and pale honey stirred in,
And she laced this potion with insidious drugs
That would make them forget their own native land.
When they had eaten and drunk, she struck them
With her wand and herded them into the sties outside.

255

Grunting, their bodies covered with bristles,
they looked just like pigs, but their minds were intact.
Once in the pens, they squealed with dismay,

And Circe threw them acorns and berries—
The usual fare for wallowing swine.

260

Eurylochus at once came back to the ship
To tell us of our comrades' unseemly fate,
But, hard as he tried, he could not speak a word.
The man was in shock. His eyes welled with tears,
And his mind was filled with images of horror.
Finally, under our impatient questioning,
He told us how his men had been undone:

265

'We went through the woods, as you told us to,
Glorious Odysseus, and found a beautiful house
In an upland clearing, built of polished stone.
Someone inside was working a great loom

270

And singing in a high, clear voice, some goddess
Or a woman, and they called out to her,
And she came out and opened the bright doors
And invited them in, and they naively
Filed in behind her. But I stayed outside,
Suspecting a trap. And they all disappeared,
Not one came back. I sat and watched
For a long, long time, and not one came back.'

280

He spoke, and I threw my silver-studded sword
Around my shoulders, slung on my bow,
And ordered Eurylochus to retrace his steps
And lead me back there. But he grabbed me by the knees
And pleaded with me, wailing miserably:
'Don't force me to go back there. Leave me here,
Because I know that you will never come back yourself
Or bring back the others. Let's just get out of here
With those that are left. We might still make it.'

285

Those were his words, and I answered him:

290

'All right, Eurylochus, you stay here by the ship.
Get yourself something to eat and drink.
I'm going, though. We're in a really tight spot.'

295

And so I went up from the ship and the sea
Into the sacred woods. I was closing in
On Circe's house, with all its bewitchment,
When I was met by Hermes. He had a golden wand
And looked like a young man, a hint of a moustache
Above his lip—youth at its most charming.
He clasped my hand and said to me:

300

'Where are you off to now, unlucky man,
Alone, and in rough, uncharted terrain?'

Those men of yours are up in Circe's house,
Penned like pigs into crowded little sties.

And you've come to free them? I don't think so.
You'll never return; you'll have to stay there, too.

Oh well, I will keep you out of harm's way.

Take this herb with you when you go to Circe,
And it will protect you from her deadly tricks.

She'll mix a potion and spike it with drugs,

But she won't be able to cast her spell

Because you'll have a charm that works just as well—

The one I'll give you—and you'll be forewarned.

When Circe strikes you with her magic wand,

Draw your sharp sword from beside your thigh

And rush at her with murder in your eye.

She'll be afraid and invite you to bed.

Don't turn her down—that's how you'll get

Your comrades freed and yourself well loved.

But first make her swear by the gods above

She will not unsex you when you are nude.

Or drain you of your manly fortitude.

So saying, Hermes gave me the herb,

Pulling it out of the ground, and showed it to me;

It was black at the root, with a milk-white flower.

Moly, the gods call it, hard for mortal men to dig up,

But the gods can do anything. Hermes rose

Through the wooded island and up to Olympus,

And I went on to Circe's house, brooding darkly

On many things. I stood at the gates

Of the beautiful goddess house and gave a shout.

She heard me call and came out at once,

Opening the bright doors and inviting me in.

I followed her inside, my heart pounding.

She seated me on a beautiful chair

Of finely wrought silver, and prepared me a drink

In a golden cup, and with evil in her heart

She laced it with drugs. She gave me the cup

And I drank it off, but it did not bewitch me;

So she struck me with her wand and said:

'Off to the sty, with the rest of your friends.'

At this, I drew the sharp sword that hung by my thigh

And lunged at Circe as if I meant to kill her.

The goddess shrieked and, running beneath my blade,

Grabbed my knees and said to me wailing:

'Who are you, and where do you come from?

What is your city and who are your parents?

I am amazed that you drank this potion

And are not bewitched. No other man

Has ever resisted this drug once it's past his lips.
But you have a mind that cannot be bewitched.

Who must be Odysseus, the man of many wiles,

In his swift black ship on his way home from Troy.

Well then, sheath your sword and let's

Climb into my bed and tangle in love there,

So we may come to trust each other.'

She spoke, and I answered her:

'Circe, how can you ask me to be gentle to you

After you've turned my men into swine?

And now you have me here and want to trick me

Into going to bed with you, so that you can

Unman me when I am naked. No, Goddess,

I'm not getting into any bed with you

Unless you agree first to swear a solemn oath

That you're not planning some new trouble for me.'

Those were my words, and she swore an oath at once

Not to do me any harm, and when she finished

I climbed into Circe's beautiful bed.

Meanwhile, her serving women were busy,

Four maidens who did all the housework,

Spirit women born of the springs and groves

And of the sacred rivers that flow to the sea.

One of them brought rugs with a purple sheen

And strewed them over chairs lined with fresh linen.

Another drew silver tables up to the chairs

And set golden baskets upon them. The third

Mixed honey-hearted wine in a silver bowl

And set out golden cups. The fourth

Filled a cauldron with water and lit a great fire

Beneath it, and when the water was boiling

In the glowing bronze, she set me in a tub

And bathed me, mixing in water from the cauldron

Until it was just how I liked it, and pouring it over

My head and shoulders until she washed from my limbs

The weariness that had consumed my soul.

When she had bathed me and rubbed me

With rich olive oil, and had thrown about me

A beautiful cloak and tunic, she led me to the hall

And had me sit on a silver-studded chair,

Richly wrought and with a matching footstool.

A maid poured water from a silver picher

Over a golden basin for me to wash my hands

And then set up a polished table nearby.

And the housekeeper, grave and dignified,

Set out bread and generous helpings

From all the dishes she had. She told me to eat,

But nothing appealed. I sat there with other thoughts
Occupying my mind, and my mood was dark.
When Circe noticed I was just sitting there,
Depressed, and not reaching out for food,
She came up to me and spoke winged words:

400

'Why are you just sitting there, Odysseus,
Eating your heart out and not touching your food?
Are you afraid of some other trick? You need not be.
I have already sworn I will do you no harm.'

405

So she spoke, and I answered her:

'Circe, how could anyone bring himself—
Any decent man—to taste food and drink
Before seeing his comrades free?
If you really want me to eat and drink,
Set my men free and let me see them.'

410

So I spoke, and Circe went outside
Holding her wand and opened the sty
And drove them out. They looked like swine
Nine or ten years old. They stood there before her
And she went through them and smeared each one
With another drug. The bristles they had grown
After Circe had given them the poisonous drug
All fell away, and they became men again,
Younger than before, taller and far handsomer.
They knew me, and they clung to my hands,
And the house rang with their passionate sobbing.
The goddess herself was moved to pity.

415

Then she came to my side and said:

425

'Son of Laertes in the line of Zeus,
My wily Odysseus, go to your ship now
Down by the sea and haul it ashore.
Then stow all the tackle and gear in caves
And come back here with the rest of your crew.'

430

So she spoke, and persuaded my heart.
I went to the shore and found my crew there
Wailing and crying beside our sailing ship.
When they saw me they were like farmyard calves
Around a herd of cows returning to the yard.
The calves bolt from their pens and run friskily
Around their mothers, lowing and mooing.
That's how my men thronged around me
When they saw me coming. It was as if
They had come home to their rugged Ithaca,
And wailing miserably they said so to me:

435

440

'With you back, Zeus-born, it is just as if
We had returned to our native Ithaca.
But tell us what happened to the rest of the crew.'

So they spoke, and I answered them gently:

445

'First let's haul our ship onto dry land
And then stow all the tackle and gear in caves.
Then I want all of you to come along with me
So you can see your shipmates in Circe's house,
Eating and drinking all they could ever want.'

450

They heard what I said and quickly agreed.
Eurylochus, though, tried to hold them back,
Speaking to them these winged words:

'Why do you want to do this to yourselves,
Go down to Circe's house? She will turn all of you
Into pigs, wolves, lions, and make you guard her house.
Remember what the Cyclops did when our shipmates
Went into his lair? It was this reckless Odysseus
Who led them there. It was his fault they died.'

455

When Eurylochus said that, I considered
Drawing my long sword from where it hung
By my thigh and lopping off his head,
Close kinsman though he was by marriage.
But my crew talked me out of it, saying things like:

460

'By your leave, let's station this man here
To guard the ship. As for the rest of us,
Lead us on to the sacred house of Circe.'

465

And so the whole crew went up from the sea,
And Eurylochus did not stay behind with the ship
But went with us, in mortal fear of my temper.

470

Meanwhile, back in Circe's house, the goddess
Had my men bathed, rubbed down with oil,
And clothed in tunics and fleecy cloaks.
We found them feasting well in her halls.
When they recognized each other, they wept openly
And their cries echoed throughout Circe's house.
Then the shining goddess stood near me and said:

475

'Lament no more. I myself know
All that you have suffered on the teeming sea
And the losses on land at your enemies' hands.
Now you must eat, drink wine, and restore the spirit
You had when you left your own native land,

480

Your rugged Ithaca. You are skin and bones now
And hollow inside. All you can think of
Is your hard wandering, no joy in your heart,
For you have indeed suffered many woes.¹

485

She spoke, and I took her words to heart.
So we sat there day after day for a year,
Feasting on abundant meat and sweet wine.
But when a year had passed, and the seasons turned,
And the moons waned and the long days were done,
My trusty crew called me out and said:

490

'Good god, man, at long last remember your home,
If it is heaven's will for you to be saved
And return to your house and your own native land.'

495

They spoke, and I saw what they meant.
So all that long day until the sun went down
We sat feasting on meat and sweet red wine.
When the sun set and darkness came on,
My men lay down to sleep in the shadowy hall,
But I went up to Circe's beautiful bed
And touching her knees I beseeched the goddess:

500

'Circe, fulfill now the promise you made
To send me home. I am eager to be gone
And so are my men, who are wearing me out
Sitting around whining and complaining.
Whenever you happen not to be present.'

505

So I spoke, and the shining goddess answered:

'Son of Laertes in the line of Zeus,
My wily Odysseus—you need not stay
Here in my house any longer than you wish.
But there is another journey you must make first—
To the house of Hades and dread Persephone,
To consult the ghost of Theban Tiresias.
The blind prophet, whose mind is still strong.
To him alone Persephone has granted
Intelligence even after his death.
The rest of the dead are flitting shadows.'

515

This broke my spirit. I sat on the bed
And wept. I had no will to live, nor did I care
If I ever saw the sunlight again.
But when I had my fill of weeping and writhing,
I looked at the goddess and said:

520

1. Hades is god of the underworld. Persephone is his wife.

'And who will guide me on this journey, Circe?
No man has ever sailed his black ship to Hades.'
And the goddess, shining, answered at once:

525

'Son of Laertes in the line of Zeus,
My wily Odysseus—do not worry about
A pilot to guide your ship. Just set up the mast,
Spread the white sail, and sit yourself down.
The North Wind's breath will bear her onwards.
But when your ship crosses the stream of Ocean
You will see a shelving shore and Persephone's groves,
Tall poplars and willows that drop their fruit.
Beach your ship there by Ocean's deep eddies,
And go yourself to the dank house of Hades.
There into Acheron flow Pyriphlegethon
And Cocytus, a branch of the water of Styx.
And there is a rock where the two roaring rivers
Flow into one. At that spot, hero, gather yourself
And do as I say.

540

Dig an ell-square pit,
And around it pour libation to all the dead,
First with milk and honey, then with sweet wine,
And a third time with water. Then sprinkle barley
And pray to the looming, feeble death-heads,
Vowing sacrifice on Ithaca, a barren heifer,
The herd's finest, and rich gifts on the altar,
And to Tiresias alone a great black ram.
After these supplications to the spirits,
Slaughter a ram and a black ewe, turning their heads
Toward Erebus,² yourself turning backward
And leaning toward the streams of the river.
Then many ghosts of the dead will come forth.
Call to your men to flay the slaughtered sheep
And burn them as a sacrifice to the gods below,
To mighty Hades and dread Persephone.
You yourself draw your sharp sword and sit there,
Keeping the feeble death-heads from the blood
Until you have questioned Tiresias.
Then, and quickly, the great seer will come.
He will tell you the route and how long it will take
For you to reach home over the teeming deep.'

560

Dawn rose in gold as she finished speaking.
Circe gave me a cloak and tunic to wear
And the nymph slipped on a long silver robe
Shimmering in the light, cinched it at the waist
With a golden belt and put a veil on her head.
I went through the halls and roused my men,
Going up to each with words soft and sweet:

565

2. The underworld.

'Time to get up! No more sleeping late.
We're on our way. Lady Circe has told me all.'

So I spoke, and persuaded their heroes' hearts.

But not even from Circe's house could I lead my men
Unscathed. One of the crew, Elpenor, the youngest,
Not much of a warrior nor all that smart,

Had gone off to sleep apart from his shipmates,
Seeking the cool air on Circe's roof

Because he was heavy with wine.

He heard the noise of his shipmates moving around
And sprang up suddenly, forgetting to go
To the long ladder that led down from the roof.

He fell headfirst, his neck snapped at the spine,
And his soul went down to the house of Hades.

As my men were heading out I spoke to them:

You think, no doubt, that you are going home,
But Circe has plotted another course for us,
To the house of Hades and dread Persephone,
To consult the ghost of Theban Tiresias.'

This broke their hearts. They sat down
Right where they were and wept and tore their hair,
But no good came of their lamentation.

While we were on our way to our swift ship
On the shore of the sea, weeping and crying,
Circe had gone ahead and tethered a ram and a black ewe
By our tarred ship. She had passed us by
Without our ever noticing. Who could see
A god on the move against the god's will?

BOOK XI

'When we reached our black ship
We hauled her onto the bright saltwater,
Set up the mast and sail, loaded on
The sheep, and boarded her ourselves,
Heartsick and weeping openly by now.
The dark prow cut through the waves
And a following wind belled the canvas,
A good sailing breeze sent by Circe,
The dread goddess with a human voice.
We lashed everything down and sat tight,
Leaving the ship to the wind and helmsman.
All day long she surged on with taut sail;
Then the sun set, and the sea grew dark.

The ship took us ~~to the deep~~, outermost Ocean
And the land of the Cimmerians, a people

Shrouded in mist. The sun never shines there,
Never climbs the starry sky to beam down at them,
Nor bathes them in the glow of its last golden rays;
Their wretched sky is always racked with night's gloom.

We beached our ship there, unloaded the sheep,
And went along the stream of Ocean

Until we came to the place spoken of by Circe.

There Perimedes and Eurylochus held the victims — *the sheep*
While I dug an el-square pit with my sword,
And poured libation to all the dead,

First with milk and honey, then with sweet wine,
And a third time with water. Then I sprinkled
White barley and prayed to the looming dead,
Vowing sacrifice on Ithaca—a barren heifer,

The herd's finest, and rich gifts on the altar,
And to Tiresias alone a great black ram.

After these supplications to the spirits,
I cut the sheep's throats over the pit,
And the dark blood pooled there.

Then out of Erebus
The souls of the dead gathered, the ghosts

Of brides and youths and worn-out old men
And soft young girls with hearts new to sorrow,
And many men wounded with bronze spears,
Killed in battle, bearing blood-stained arms.

They drifted up to the pit from all sides
With an eerie cry, and pale fear seized me.

I called to my men to flay the slaughtered sheep
And burn them as a sacrifice to the gods,
To mighty Hades and dread Persephone.

Myself, I drew my sharp sword and sat,
Keeping the feeble death-heads from the blood
Until I had questioned Tiresias.

First to come was the ghost of Elpenor,
Whose body still lay in Circe's hall,
Unmourned, unburied, since we'd been hard pressed.
I wept when I saw him, and with pity in my heart
Spoke to him these feathered words:

'Elpenor, how did you get to the undergloom
Before me, on foot, outstripping our black ship?'

I spoke, and he moaned in answer:

'Bad luck and too much wine undid me.
I fell asleep on Circe's roof. Coming down
I missed my step on the long ladder
And fell headfirst. My neck snapped
At the spine and my ghost went down to Hades.

Now I beg you—by those we left behind,
By your wife and the father who reared you,
And by Telemachus, your only son,
Whom you left alone in your halls—
When you put the gloom of Hades behind you
And beach your ship on the Isle of Aeaea,
As I know you will, remember me, my lord.
Do not leave me unburied, un nourned,
When you sail for home, or I might become
A cause of the gods' anger against you.
Burn me with my armor, such as I have,
Heap me a barrow on the grey sea's shore,
In memory of a man whose luck ran out.
Do this for me, and fix in the mound the oar
I rowed with my shipmates while I was alive.'

Thus Elpenor, and I answered him:

'Pitiful spirit, I will do this for you.'

Such were the sad words we exchanged
Sitting by the pit, I on one side holding my sword
Over the blood, my comrade's ghost on the other.

Then came the ghost of my dead mother,
Anticleia, daughter of the hero Autolycus.
She was alive when I left for sacred Ilion.
I wept when I saw her, and pitied her,
But even in my grief I would not allow her
To come near the blood until I had questioned Tiresias.

And then he came, the ghost of Theban Tiresias,
Bearing a golden staff. He knew me and said:

'Odysseus, son of Laertes, master of wiles,
Why have you come, leaving the sunlight
To see the dead and this joyless place?
Move off from the pit and take away your sword,
So I may drink the blood and speak truth to you.'

I drew back and slid my silver-studded sword
Into its sheath. After he had drunk the dark blood
The flawless seer rose and said to me:

'You seek a homecoming sweet as honey,
Shining Odysseus, but a god will make it bitter,
For I do not think you will elude the Earthshaker,
Who has laid up wrath in his heart against you,
Furious because you blinded his son. Still,
You just might get home, though not without pain,

You and your men, if you curb your own spirit,
And ~~beach~~ too, when you beach your ship
On Ithrinacia, you will be marooned on that island
In the violet sea, and find there the cattle
Of Helios the Sun, and his sheep, too, grazing.
Leave these unharmed, keep your mind on your homecoming,
And you may still reach Ithaca, though not without pain.
But if you harm them, I foretell doom for you,

Your ship, and your crew. And even if you
Yourself escape, you will come home late
And badly, having lost all companions
And in another's ship. And you shall find
Trouble in your house, arrogant men
Devouring your wealth and courting your wife.

Yet vengeance will be yours, and when you have slain
The suitors in your hall, by ruse or by sword,
Then you must go off again, carrying a broad-bladed oar,
Until you come to men who know nothing of the sea,
Who eat their food unsalted, and have never seen
Red-prowed ships or oars that wing them along.

And I will tell you a sure sign that you have found them,
One you cannot miss. When you meet another traveler
Who thinks you are carrying a winnowing fan,
Then you must fix your oar in the earth
And offer sacrifice to Lord Poseidon,

A ram, a bull, and a boar in its prime.
Then return to your home and offer
Perfect sacrifice to the immortal gods
Who hold high heaven, to each in turn.
And death will come to you off the sea,
A death so gentle, and carry you off
When you are worn out in sleek old age,
Your people prosperous all around you.
All this will come true for you as I have told.'

Thus Tiresias. And I answered him:

'All that, Tiresias, is as the gods have spun it.
But tell me this: I see here the ghost
Of my dead mother, sitting in silence
Beside the blood, and she cannot bring herself
To look her son in the eye or speak to him.
How can she recognize me for who I am?'

And Tiresias, the Theban prophet:

'This is easy to tell you. Whoever of the dead
You let come to the blood will speak truly to you.
Whoever you deny will go back again.'

With that, the ghost of Lord Tiresias
Went back into Hades, his soothsaying done.

But I stayed where I was until my mother
Came up and drank the dark blood. At once
She knew me, and her words reached me on wings:

'My child, how did you come to the undergloom
While you are still alive? It is hard for the living
To reach these shores. There are many rivers to cross,
Great bodies of water, nightmarish streams,
And Ocean itself, which cannot be crossed on foot
But only in a well-built ship. Are you still wandering
On your way back from Troy, a long time at sea
With your ship and your men? Have you not yet come
To Ithaca, or seen your wife in your halls?'

So she spoke, and I answered her:

'Mother, I came here because I had to,
To consult the ghost of the prophet Tiresias.
I have not yet come to the coast of Achaea
Or set foot on my own land. I have had nothing
But hard travels from the day I set sail
With Lord Agamemnon to go to Ilion,
Famed for its horses, to fight the Trojans.
But tell me truly, how did you die?
Was it a long illness, or did Artemis
Shoot you suddenly with her gentle arrows?
And tell me about my father and my son,
Whom I left behind. Does the honor I had
Still remain with them, or has it passed
To some other man, and do they all say
I will never return? And what about my wife?
What has she decided, what does she think?
Is she still with my son, keeping things safe?
Or has someone already married her,
Whoever is now the best of the Achaeans?'

So I spoke, and my mother answered at once:

'Oh, yes indeed, she remains in your halls,
Her heart enduring the bitter days and nights.
But the honor that was yours has not passed
To any man. Telemachus holds your lands
Unchallenged, and shares in the feasts
To which all men invite him as the island's lawgiver.
Your father, though, stays out in the fields
And does not come to the city. He has no bed
Piled with bright rugs and soft coverlets
But sleeps in the house where the slaves sleep,
In the ashes by the fire, and wears poor clothes.

3. Greeks.

In summer and autumn his vineyard's slope
Is strewn with beds of leaves on the ground,
Where he lies in his sorrow, nursing his grief,
Longing for your return. His old age is hard.
I died from the same grief! The keen-eyed goddess
Did not shoot me at home with her gentle shafts,
Nor did any long illness waste my body away.
No, it was longing for you, my glorious Odysseus,
For your gentle heart and your gentle ways,
That robbed me of my honey-sweet life.
So she spoke, and my heart yearned
To embrace the ghost of my dead mother.
Three times I rushed forward to hug her,
And three times she drifted out of my arms
Like a shadow or a dream. The pain
That pierced my heart grew ever sharper,
And my words rose to my mother on wings:

'Mother, why do you slip away when I try
To embrace you? Even though we are in Hades,
Why can't we throw our arms around each other
And console ourselves with chill lamentation?
Are you a phantom sent by Persephone
To make me groan even more in my grief?'

And my mother answered me at once:

'O my child, most ill-fated of men,
It is not that Persephone is deceiving you.
This is the way it is with mortals.
When we die, the sinews no longer hold
Flesh and bones together. The fire destroys these
As soon as the spirit leaves the white bones,
And the ghost flutters off and is gone like a dream.
Hurry now to the light, and remember these things,
So that later you may tell them all to your wife.'

That was the drift of our talk.

Then the women came,
Sent by Persephone, all those who had been
The wives and daughters of the heroes of old.
They flocked together around the dark blood,
But I wanted to question them one at a time.
The best way I could think of to question them
Was to draw the sharp sword from beside my thigh,
And keep them from drinking the blood all at once.
They came up in procession then, and one by one
They declared their birth, and I questioned them all.
The first one I saw was highborn Tyro,
Who said she was born of flawless Salmonesus

And was wed to Cretheus, a son of Aeolus.
 She fell in love with a river, divine Enipeus,
 The most beautiful of all the rivers on earth,
 And she used to play in his lovely streams.
 But the Earthshaker took Enipeus' form
 And lay with her in the swirling eddies
 Near the river's mouth. And an indigo wave,
 Towering like a mountain, arched over them
 And hid the god and the mortal woman from view.
 He unbound the sash that had kept her virgin
 And shed sleep upon her. And when the god
 Had finished his lovemaking, he took her hand
 And called her name softly and said to her:

Be happy in this love, woman. As the year turns
 You will bear glorious children, for a god's embrace
 Is never barren. Raise them and care for them.
 Now go to your house and say nothing of this.
 But I am Poseidon, who makes the earth tremble.

With that he plunged into the surging sea
 And Tyro conceived and bore Pelias and Neleus,
 Who served great Zeus as strong heroes both,
 Pelias with his flocks in Iolcus' grasslands,
 And Neleus down in sandy Pylos.
 She bore other children to Cretheus: Aeson,
 Pheres, and the charioteer Amythaon.

Then I saw Antiope, daughter of Asopus,
 Who boasted she had slept in the arms of Zeus
 And bore two sons, Amphion and Zethus,
 Who founded seven-gated Thebes and built its walls.
 Since they could not live in the wide land of Thebes
 Without walls and towers, mighty though they were.

Next I saw Alcmene, Amphityon's wife,
 Who bore Heracles, the lionhearted battler,
 After lying in Zeus' almighty embrace.
 And I saw Megara, too, wife of Heracles,
 The hero whose strength never wore out.

I saw Oedipus' mother, beautiful Epicaste,
 Who unwittingly did a monstrous deed,
 Marrying her son, who had killed his father.
 The gods soon brought these things to light;
 Yet, for all his misery, Oedipus still ruled
 In lovely Thebes, by the gods' dark designs.
 But Epicaste, overcome by her grief,
 Hung a deadly noose from the ceiling rafters
 And went down to implacable Hades' realm.

Leaving behind for her son all of the sorrows
 A mother's avenging spirits can cause.⁴

And then I saw Chloris, the great beauty
 Whom Neleus wedded after courting her
 With myriad gifts. She was the youngest daughter
 Of Amphion, king of Minyan Orchomenus.
 As queen of Pylos, she bore glorious children,
 Nestor, Chromius, and lordly Periclymenus,
 And magnificent Pero, a wonder to men.
 Everyone wanted to marry her, but Neleus
 Would only give her to the man who could drive
 The cattle of mighty Iphicles to Pylos,
 Spiral-horned, broad-browed, stubborn cattle,
 Difficult to drive. Only Melampus,
 The flawless seer, rose to the challenge,
 But he was shackled by Fate. Country herdsman
 Put him in chains, and months went by
 And the seasons passed and the year turned
 Before he was freed by mighty Iphicles,
 After he had told him all of his oracles,
 And so the will of Zeus was fulfilled.

I saw Leda also, wife of Tyndareus,
 Who bore to him two stout-hearted sons,
 Castor the horseman and the boxer Polydeuces.
 They are under the teeming earth though alive,
 And have honor from Zeus in the world below,
 Living and dying on alternate days.
 Such is the honor they have won from the gods.

After her I saw Iphimedeia,
 Aloeus' wife. She made love to Poseidon
 And bore two sons, who did not live long,
 Godlike Otus and famed Ephialtes.
 The tallest men ever reared upon earth
 And the handsomest after gloried Orion.
 At nine years old they measured nine cubits
 Across the chest, and were nine fathoms tall.
 They threatened to wage a furious war
 Against the immortal Olympian gods,
 And were bent on piling Ossa on Olympus,
 And so reach the sky. And they would have done it,
 But the son of Zeus and fair-haired Leto
 Destroyed them both before the dawn blossomed
 Upon their cheeks and their beards had come in.

4. This passage gives a version of the myth different from that of Sophocles' play, in which Oedipus's mother is called Jocasta.

And I saw Phaedra and Procris
And lovely Ariadne, whom Theseus once
Tried to bring from Crete to sacred Athens
But had no joy of her. Artemis first
Shot her on Dia, the seagirt island.
After Dionysus told her he saw her there.⁵

330

And I saw Maera and Clymene
And hateful Eriphyle, who valued gold
More than her husband's life.⁶

335

But I could not tell you
All the wives and daughters of heroes I saw.
It would take all night. And it is time

To sleep now, either aboard ship with the crew
Or here in this house. My journey home
Is up to you, and to the immortal gods."

340

He paused, and they sat hushed in silence,
Spellbound throughout the shadowy hall.
And then white-armed Arete began to speak:

345

"Well, Phaeacians, does this man impress you
With his looks, stature, and well-balanced mind?
He is my guest, moreover, though each of you
Shares in that honor. Do not send him off, then,
Too hastily, and do not stint your gifts
To one in such need. You have many treasures
Stored in your halls by grace of the gods."

350

Then the old hero Echeclus spoke up:

"Friends, the words of our wise queen
Are not wide of the mark. Give them heed.
But upon Alcinous depend both word and deed."

355

And Alcinous answered:

"Arete's word will stand, as long as I live
And rule the Phaeacians who love the oar.
But let our guest, though he longs to go home,
Endure until tomorrow, until I have time
To make our gift complete. We all have a stake
In getting him home, but mine is greatest,
For mine is the power throughout the land."

360

And Odysseus, who missed nothing:

5. In other versions of the myth, Ariadne was
abandoned by Theseus on the island of Naxos
and rescued by Dionysus, god of wine.
6. Bribe with the necklace of Harmonia, she
persuaded her husband, Amphipratus, to join
the attack on Thebes, although she knew he
would die.

"Lord Alcinous, most renowned of men,
You could ask me to stay for even a year
While you arranged a send-off with glorious gifts,
And I would assent. Better far to return
With a fuller hand to my own native land.
I would be more respected and loved by all
Who saw me come back to Ithaca."

370

Alcinous answered him:

"Odysseus, we do not take you
For the sort of liar and cheat the dark earth breeds
Among men everywhere, telling tall tales
No man could ever test for himself.
Your words have outward grace and wisdom within,
And you have told your tale with the skill of a bard—
All that the Greeks and you yourself have suffered.
But tell me this, as accurately as you can:

375

Did you see any of your godlike comrades
Who went with you to Troy and met their fate there?
The night is young—and magical. It is not yet time
To sleep in the hall. Tell me these wonders.
Sit in our hall and tell us of your woes
For as long as you can bear. I could listen until dawn."

385

And Odysseus, his mind teeming:

"Lord Alcinous, most glorious of men,
There is a time for words and a time for sleep.
But if you still yearn to listen, I will not refuse
To tell you of other things more pitiable still.
The woes of my comrades who died after the war,
Who escaped the Trojans and their battle-cry
But died on their return through a woman's evil."

390

When holy Persephone had scattered
The women's ghosts, there came the ghost
Of Agamemnon, son of Atreus.

395

Distraught with grief, around him were gathered
Those who died with him in Aegisthus' house.
He knew me as soon as he drank the dark blood.
He cried out shrilly, tears welling in his eyes,
And he stretched out his hands, trying to touch me.
But he no longer had anything left of the strength
He had in the old days in those muscled limbs.
I wept when I saw him, and with pity in my heart
I spoke to him these winged words:

405

"Son of Atreus, king of men, most glorious
Agamemnon—what death laid you low?
Did Poseidon sink your fleet at sea,
After hitting you hard with hurricane winds?
Or were you killed by enemy forces on land,

410

As you raided their cattle and flocks of sheep
Or fought to capture their city and women?⁷

And Agamemnon answered at once:

'Son of Laertes in the line of Zeus,
My crafty Odysseus—No,
Poseidon did not sink my fleet at sea
After hitting us hard with hurricane winds,
Nor was I killed by enemy forces on land.

Aegisthus was the cause of my death.
He killed me with the help of my cursed wife
After inviting me to a feast in his house,
Slaughtered me like a bull at a manger.
So I died a most pitiable death,

And all around me my men were killed
Relentlessly, like white-tusked swine
For a wedding banquet or dinner party
In the house of a rich and powerful man.
You have seen many men cut down, both
In single combat and in the crush of battle,
But your heart would have grieved

As never before at the sight of us lying
Around the wine-bowl and the laden tables
In that great hall. The floor steamed with blood.
But the most piteous cry I ever heard

Came from Cassandra, Priam's daughter:⁷
She had her arms around me down on the floor
When Clytemnestra ran her through from behind.
I lifted my hands and beat the ground

As I lay dying with a sword in my chest,
But that bitch, my wife, turned her back on me
And would not shut my eyes or close my lips
As I was going down to Death. Nothing

Is more grim or more shameless than a woman
Who sets her mind on such an unspeakable act
As killing her own husband. I was sure
I would be welcomed home by my children

And all my household, but she, with her mind set
On stark horror, has shamed not only herself
But all women to come, even the rare good one.'

Thus Agamemnon, and I responded:

'Ah, how broad-browed Zeus has persecuted
The house of Atreus from the beginning,
Through the will of women. Many of us died
For Helen's sake, and Clytemnestra
Set a snare for you while you waited far away.⁸

7. Cassandra, who had the gift of prophecy from Apollo, was brought back from Troy as a

prize of war by Agamemnon.
8. Helen and Clytemnestra were sisters.

And Agamemnon answered me at once:

'So don't go easy on your own wife either,
Or tell her everything you know.

Tell her some things, but keep some hidden.
But your wife will not bring about your death,
Odysseus. Icarus' daughter,
Your wise Penelope, is far too prudent.

She was newly wed when we went to war.
We left her with a baby boy still at the breast,
Who must by now be counted as a man,

And prosperous. His father will see him
When he comes, and he will embrace his father,
As is only right. But my wife did not let me
Even fill my eyes with the sight of my son.
She killed me before I could do even that.

But let me tell you something, Odysseus:
Beach your ship secretly when you come home.
Women just can't be trusted any more.
And one more thing. Tell me truthfully
If you've heard anything about my son

And where he is living, perhaps in Orchomenus,
Or in sandy Pylos, or with Menelaus in Sparta.
For Orestes has not yet perished from the earth.'

So he spoke, and I answered him:

'Son of Atreus, why ask me this?
I have no idea whether he is alive or dead,
And it is not good to speak words empty as wind.'

Such were the sad words we had for each other
As we stood there weeping, heavy with grief.

Then came the ghost of Achilles,⁹ son of Peleus,
And those of Patroclus and peerless Antilochus
And Ajax,¹ who surpassed all the Danaans,
Except Achilles, in looks and build.
Aeacus, incomparable grandson, Achilles, knew me,
And when he spoke his words had wings:

'Son of Laertes in the line of Zeus,
Odysseus, you hard rover, not even you
Can ever top this, this bold foray
Into Hades, home of the witless dead
And the dim phantoms of men outworn.'

So he spoke, and I answered him:

9. Best of the Greek heroes, prominent character in the *Iliad*.
1. Strong Greek hero known for defensive fighting.

'Achilles, by far the mightiest of the Achaeans,
I have come here to consult Tiresias,
To see if he has any advice for me.
On how I might get back to rugged Ithaca.
I've had nothing but trouble, and have not yet set foot
On my native land. But no man, Achilles,
Has ever been as blessed as you, or ever will be.
While you were alive the army honored you
Like a god, and now that you are here
You rule the dead with might. You should not
lament your death at all, Achilles.'

I spoke, and he answered me at once:

'Don't try to sell me on death, Odysseus.
I'd rather be a hired hand back up on earth,
Slaughtering away for some poor dirt farmer,
Than lord it over all these withered dead.
But tell me about that boy of mine.
Did he come to the war and take his place
As one of the best? Or did he stay away?
And what about Peleus? What have you heard?
Is he still respected among the Myrmidons,
Or do they dishonor him in Phthia and Hellas,
Crippled by old age in hand and foot?
And I'm not there for him up in the sunlight
With the strength I had in wide Troy once
When I killed Ilion's best and saved the army.
Just let me come with that kind of strength
To my father's house, even for an hour,
And wrap my hands around his enemies' throats.
They would learn what it means to face my temper.'

Thus Achilles, and I answered him:

'I have heard nothing of flawless Peleus,
But as for your son, Neoptolemus,
I'll tell you all I know, just as you ask.
I brought him over from Scyros myself,
In a fine vessel, to join the Greek army
At Troy, and every time we held council there,
He was always the first to speak, and his words
Were never off the mark. Godlike Nestor and I
Alone surpassed him. And every time we fought
On Troy's plain, he never held back in the ranks
But charged ahead to the front, yielding
To no one, and he killed many in combat.
I could not begin to name them all,
All the men he killed when he fought for us,
But what a hero he dismantled in Telephus' son,

Eurypylos, dispatching him and a crowd
Of his Ceteian compatriots. Eurypylos
Came to Troy because Priam bribed his mother.
After Memnon, I've never seen a handsomer man.
And then, too, when all our best climbed
Into the wooden horse Ulysses made,
And I was in command and controlled the trapdoor,
All the other Danaan leaders and counselors
Were wiping away tears from their eyes
And their legs shook beneath them, but I never saw
Neoptolemus blanch or wipe away a tear.
No, he just sat there handling his sword hilt
And heavy bronze spear, and all he wanted
Was to get out of there and give the Trojans hell.
And after we had sacked Priam's steep city,
He boarded his ship with his share of the loot
And more for valor. And not a scratch on him.
He never took a hit from a spear or sword
In close combat, where wounds are common.
When Ares rages anyone can be hit.'

So I spoke, and the ghost of swift-footed Achilles
Went off with huge strides through the fields of asphodel,
Filled with joy at his son's preeminence.

The other ghosts crowded around in sorrow,
And each asked about those who were dear to him.
Only the ghost of Telamonian Ajax
stood apart, still furious with me
Because I had defeated him in the contest at Troy
To decide who would get Achilles' armor.
His goddess mother had put it up as a prize,
And the judges were the sons of the Trojans
And Pallas Athena. I wish I had never won.
That contest buried Ajax, that brave heart,
The best of the Danaans in looks and deeds,
After the incomparable son of Peleus.
I tried to win him over with words like these:

'Ajax, son of flawless Telamon,
Are you to be angry with me even in death
Over that accursed armor? The gods
Must have meant it to be the ruin of the Greeks.
We lost a tower of strength to that armor.
We mourn your loss as we mourn the loss
Of Achilles himself. Zeus alone
Is to blame. He persecuted the Greeks
Terribly, and he brought you to your doom.
No, come back, Lord Ajax, and listen!
Control your wrath and rein in your proud spirit.'

I spoke, but he said nothing. He went his way
To Erebus, to join the other souls of the dead.
He might yet have spoken to me there, or I
Might yet have spoken to him, but my heart
Yearned to see the other ghosts of the dead.

595

There I saw Minos,² Zeus' glorious son,
Scepter in hand, judging the dead
As he sat in the wide-gated house of Hades;
And the dead sat, too, and asked him for judgments.

600

And then Orion³ loomed up before me,
Driving over the fields of asphodel
The beasts he had slain in the lonely hills,
In his hands a bronze club, forever unbroken.

And I saw Tityos, a son of glorious Earth,
Lying on the ground, stretched over nine acres,
And two vultures sat on either side of him
And tore at his liver, plunging their beaks
Deep into his guts, and he could not beat them off.
For Tityos had raped Leto, a consort of Zeus,
As she went to Pytho through lovely Panopeus.

605

610

And I saw Tantalus there in his agony,
Standing in a pool with water up to his chin.
He was mad with thirst, but unable to drink,
For every time the old man bent over
The water would drain away and vanish.
Dried up by some god, and only black mud
Would be left at his feet. Above him dangled
Tree-top fruits, pears and pomegranates.
Shiny apples, sweet figs, and luscious olives.
But whenever Tantalus reached up for them,
The wind tossed them high to the shadowy clouds.

615

620

And I saw Sisyphus there in his agony,
Pushing a monstrous stone with his hands.
Digging in hard, he would manage to shove it
To the crest of a hill, but just as he was about
To heave it over the top, the shameless stone
Would teeter back and bound down to the plain.
Then he would strain every muscle to push it back up,
Sweat pouring from his limbs and dusty head.

625

630

And then mighty Heracles loomed up before me—
His phantom that is, for Heracles himself

2. Son of Zeus and Europa: he became judge of the dead.

Feasts with the gods and has as his wife
Beautiful Hebe,⁴ daughter of great Zeus
And gold-sandaled Hera. As he moved
A clamor arose from the dead around him,
As if they were birds flying off in terror.
He looked like midnight itself. He held his bow
With an arrow on the string, and he glared around him
As if he were always about to shoot. His belt,
A baldrick of gold crossing his chest,
Was stark horror, a phantasmagoria
Of Bears, and wild Boars, and green-eyed Lions,
Of Battles, and Bloodshed, Murder and Mayhem.
May this be its maker's only masterpiece,
And may there never again be another like it.
Heracles recognized me at once,
And his words beat down on me like dark wings:

635

640

645

'Son of Laertes in the line of Zeus,
Crafty Odysseus—poor man, do you too
Drag out a wretched destiny
Such as I once bore under the rays of the sun?
I was a son of Zeus and grandson of Cronus,
But I had immeasurable suffering,
Enslaved to a man who was far less than I
And who laid upon me difficult labors.⁵
Once he even sent me here, to fetch
The Hound of Hell,⁶ for he could devise
No harder task for me than this. That hound
I carried out of the house of Hades,
With Hermes and grey-eyed Athena as guides.'

655

660

And Heracles went back into the house of Hades.
But I stayed where I was, in case any more
Of the heroes of yesteryear might yet come forth.
And I would have seen some of them—
Heroes I longed to meet, Theseus and Peirithous,⁷
Glorious sons of the gods—but before I could,
The nations of the dead came thronging up
With an eerie cry, and I turned pale with fear
That Persephone would send from Hades' depths
The pale head of that monster, the Gorgon.⁸

665

670

4. *Hebe* means "youth."

5. Eurystheus, at the behest of the goddess Hera, laid the labors on Heracles, whom she resented as an illegitimate son of her husband, Zeus.

6. Cerberus, guard dog of the underworld.

7. A son of Poseidon, Theseus was a mythic

king of Athens and killer of the Minotaur. Peirithous was his best friend, a son of Zeus; together they went to the underworld, hoping to abduct Persephone.

8. Female monster whose gaze turns onlookers to stone.

I went to the ship at once and called to my men
To get aboard and unite the stern cables.
They boarded quickly and sat at their benches.
The current bore the ship down the River Ocean.
We rowed at first, and then caught a good tailwind.¹

675

BOOK XII

"Our ship left the River Ocean
And came to the swell of the open sea
And the Island of Aeaea,
Where Dawn has her dancing grounds
And the Sun his risings. We beached our ship
On the sand, disembarked, and fell asleep
On the shore, waiting for daybreak.

5

Light blossomed like roses in the eastern sky,
And I sent some men to the house of Circe
To bring back the body of Elpenor.
We cut wood quickly, and on the headland's point
We held a funeral, shedding warm tears.
When the body was burned, and the armor with it,
We heaped up a mound, dragged a stone onto it,
And on the tomb's very top we planted his oar.

15

While we were busy with these things,
Circe, aware that we had come back
From the Underworld, put on her finest clothes
And came to see us. Her serving women
Brought meat, bread, and bright red wine,
And the goddess shone with light as she spoke:

20

"So you went down alive to Hades' house.
Most men die only once, but you twice.
Come, though, eat and drink wine
The whole day through. You sail at dawn.
I will tell you everything on your route,
So that you will not come to grief
In some web of evil on land or sea."

25

She spoke, and our proud hearts consented.
All day long until the sun went down
We sat feasting on meat and good red wine.
When the sun set and darkness came on
My men went to sleep beside the ship's stern-cables.
But Circe took me by the hand and had me sit
Away from my men. And she lay down beside me
And asked me about everything. I told her all
Just as it happened, and then the goddess spoke:

35

"So all that is done. But now listen
To what I will tell you. One day a god

Will remind you of it. First, you will come
To the Sirens, who bewitch all men
Who come near. Anyone who approaches
Unaware and hears their voice will never again
Be welcomed home by wife and children
Dancing with joy at his return—
Not after the Sirens bewitch him with song.
They loll in a meadow, and around them are piled
The bones of shriveled and moldering bodies.
Row past them, first kneading sweet wax
And smearing it into the ears of your crew
So they cannot hear. But if you yourself
Have a mind to listen, have them bind you
Hand and foot upright in the mast-step
And tie the ends of the rope to the mast.
Then you can enjoy the song of the Sirens.
If you command your crew and plead with them
To release you, they should tie you up tighter.
After your men have rowed past the Sirens,
I will not prescribe which of two ways to go.
You yourself must decide. I will tell you both.

55

"One route takes you past beetling crags
Pounded by blue-eyed Amphitrité's seas.
The blessed gods call these the Wandering Rocks.
Not even birds can wing their way through.
Even the doves that bring ambrosia to Zeus
Crash and perish on that slick stone,
And the Father has to replenish their numbers.
Ships never get through. Whenever one tries,
The sea is awash with timbers and bodies
Blasted by the waves and the fiery winds.
Only one ship has ever passed through.
The famous Argo as she sailed from Aeetes
And even she would have been hurled onto those crags
Had not Hera loved Jason and sent his ship through.⁹

65

*I think this
is Circe's
in v. 67.*

70

"On the other route there are two rocks.
One stabs its peak into the sky
And is ringed by a dark blue cloud. This cloud
Never melts, and the air is never clear
During summer or autumn. No mortal man
Could ever scale this rock, not even if he had
Twenty hands and feet. The stone is as smooth
As if it were polished. Halfway up the cliff
Is a misty cave facing the western gloom.
It is there you will sail your hollow ship

80

9. The Greek hero Jason went in the world's first ship, the *Argo*, to get the Golden Fleece from Aeetes, king of Colchis; the goddess Hera helped him get home.

If you listen to me, glorious Odysseus,
The strongest archer could not shoot an arrow
Up from his ship all the way to the cave,
Which is the lair of Scylla. She barks and yelps
Like a young puppy, but she is a monster,
An evil monster that not even a god
Would be glad to see. She has—listen to this—
Twelve gangly legs and six very long necks,
And on each neck is perched a bloodcurdling head,
Each with three rows of close-set teeth
Full of black death. Up to her middle
She is concealed in the cave, but her heads dangle
Into the abyss, and she fishes by the rock
For dolphins and seals or other large creatures
That the moaning sea breeds in multitudes.
No crew can boast to have sailed past Scylla
Unscathed. With each head she carries off a man,
Snatching him out of his dark-prowed vessel.

The other rock, as you will see, Odysseus,
Lies lower—the two are close enough
That you could shoot an arrow across—
And on this rock is a large, leafy fig tree.
Beneath this tree the divine Charybdis
Sucks down the black water. Three times a day
She belches it out and three times a day
She sucks it down horribly. Don't be there
When she sucks it down. No one could save you,
Not even Poseidon, who makes the earth tremble.
No, stay close to Scylla's rock, and push hard.
Better to mourn six than the whole crew at once.¹

Thus Circe. And I, in a panic:
I beg you, goddess, tell me, is there
Any way I can escape from Charybdis
And still protect my men from the other?²

And the goddess, in a nimbus of light:
There you go again, always the hero.
Won't you yield even to the immortals?
She's not mortal, she's an immortal evil,
Dread, dire, ferocious, unfightable.
There is no defense. It's flight, not fight.
If you pause so much as to put on a helmet
She'll attack again with just as many heads
And kill just as many men as before.
Just row past as hard as you can. And call upon

Crateüs, the mother who bore her as a plague to men.
She will stop her from attacking a second time.

Then you will come to Thrinacia,
An island that pastures the cattle of the Sun,
Seven herds of cattle and seven flocks of sheep,
Fifty in each. They are immortal.
They bear no young and they never die off,
And their shepherds are goddesses,
Nymphs with gorgeous hair, Phaethusa
And Lampetie, whom gleaming Neaera
Bore to Helios, Hyperion the Sun.¹
When she had borne them and reared them
She sent them to Thrinacia, to live far away
And keep their father's spiral-horned cattle.
If you leave these unharmed and keep your mind
On your journey, you might yet struggle home
To Ithaca. But if you harm them, I foretell
Disaster for your ship and crew, and even if you
Escape yourself, you shall come home late
And badly, having lost all your companions.

Dawn rose in gold as she finished speaking,
And light played about her as she disappeared
Up the island.
I went to the ship
And got my men going. They loosened
The stern cables and were soon in their benches,
Beating the water white with their oars.
A following wind rose in the wake
Of our dark-prowed ship, a sailor's breeze
Sent by Circe, that dread, beautiful goddess.
We tied down the tackling and sat tight,
Letting the wind and the helmsman take over.

Then I made a heavy-hearted speech to my men:
'Friends, it is not right that one or two alone
Should know what the goddess Circe foretold.
Better we should all know, live or die.
We may still beat death and get out of this alive.
First, she told us to avoid the eerie voices
Of the Sirens and sail past their soft meadows.
She ordered me alone to listen. Bind me
Hand and foot upright in the mast-step
And tie the ends of the rope to the mast.
If I command you and plead with you
To release me, just tie me up tighter.'

1. Helios and Hyperion are both sun gods, here confused.

Those were my instructions to the crew.

Meanwhile, our good ship was closing fast
On the Sirens' island, when the breeze we'd had
Tailed off, and we were becalmed—not a breath

Of wind left—some spirit lulled the waves.

My men got up and furled the sails,
Stowed them in the ship's hold, then sat down
At their oars and whitened the water with pine.

Myself, I got out a wheel of wax, cut it up
With my sharp knife, and kneaded the pieces
Until they were soft and warm, a quick job

With Lord Helios glaring down from above.
Then I went down the rows and smeared the wax
Into all my men's ears. They in turn bound me

Hand and foot upright to the mast,
Tied the ends of the rope to the mast, and then
Sat down and beat the sea white with their oars.

We were about as far away as a shout would carry,
Surging ahead, when the Sirens saw our ship
Looming closer, and their song pierced the air:

'Come hither, Odysseus,
glory of the Achaeans,

Stop your ship
so you can hear our voices.

No one has ever sailed

his black ship past here
Without listening to the honeyed

sound from our lips.

He journeys on delighted
and knows more than before.

For we know everything
that the Greeks and Trojans

Suffered in wide Troy
by the will of the gods.

We know all that happens
on the teeming earth.'

They made their beautiful voices carry,
And my heart yearned to listen. I ordered my men
To untie me, signaling with my brows,

But they just leaned on their oars and rowed on.
Permeides and Eurylochus jumped up,

Looped more rope around me, and pulled tight.
When we had rowed past, and the Sirens' song

Had faded on the waves, only then did my crew
Take the wax from their ears and untie me.

We had no sooner left the island when I saw

The spray from an enormous wave
And heard its booming. The oars flew
From my men's frightened hands
And shirred in the waves, stopping the ship
Dead in the water. I went down the rows
And tried to boost the crew's morale:

'Come on, men, this isn't the first time
We've run into trouble. This can't be worse
Than when the Cyclops with his brute strength

Had us penned in his cave. We got out
By my courage and fast thinking. One day
We'll look back on this. Now let's do as I say,

Every man of you! Stay on your benches
And beat the deep surf with your oars!
Zeus may yet deliver us from death.

Helmaman, here's my command to you,
And make sure you remember it, since
You're steering this vessel: Keep the ship

Away from this heavy surf. Hug the cliff,
Or before you know it she'll swerve
To starboard and you'll send us all down.'

I spoke, they obeyed. But I didn't mention
Scylla. There was nothing we could do about that,
And I didn't want the crew to freeze up,

Stop rowing, and huddle together in the hold.

Then I forgot Circe's stern warning

Not to arm myself no matter what happened.

I strapped on my bronze, grabbed two long spears
And went to the foredeck, where I thought

Scylla would first show herself from the cliff.

But I couldn't see her anywhere, and my eyes
Grew weary scanning the misty rock face.

We sailed on up the narrow channel, wailing,
Scylla on one side, Charybdis on the other

Sucking down saltwater. When she belched it up
She seethed and bubbled like a boiling cauldron

And the spray would reach the tops of the cliffs.
When she sucked it down you could see her

Churning within, and the rock bellowed
And roared, and you could see the sea floor

Black with sand. My men were pale with fear.
While we looked at her, staring death in the eyes,

Scylla seized six of my men from our ship,
The six strongest hands aboard. Turning my eyes

To the deck and my crew, I saw above me
Their hands and feet as they were raised aloft.

They cried down to me, calling me by name
That one last time in their agony.

You know

How a fisherman on a jutting rock
Casts his bait with his long pole. The horned hook
Sinks into the sea, and when he catches a fish
He pulls it writhing and squirming out of the water.
Writhing like that my men were drawn up the cliff.
And Scylla devoured them at her door, as they shrieked
And stretched their hands down to me
In their awful struggle. Of all the things
That I have borne while I scoured the seas,
I have seen nothing more pitiable.

When we had fled Charybdis, the rocks,
And Scylla, we came to the perfect island
Of Hyperion the Sun, where his herds ranged
And his flocks browsed. While our black ship
Was still out at sea I could hear the bleating
Of the sheep and the lowing of the cattle
As they were being penned, and I remembered
The words of the blind seer, Theban Tiresias,
And of Circe, who gave me strict warnings
To shun the island of the warmth-giving Sun.
And so I spoke to my crew with heavy heart:

'Hear my words, men, for all your pain.
So I can tell you Tiresias' prophecies
And Circe's, too, who gave me strict warnings
To shun the island of the warmth-giving Sun,
For there she said was our gravest peril.
No, row our black ship clear of this island.'

This broke their spirits, and at once
Eurylochus answered me spitefully:

'You're a hard man, Odysseus, stronger
Than other men, and you never wear out,
A real iron-man, who won't allow his crew,
Dead tired from rowing and lack of sleep,
To set foot on shore, where we might make
A meal we could enjoy. No, you just order us
To wander on through the swift darkness
Over the misty deep, and be driven away
From the island. It is at night that winds rise
That wreck ships. How could we survive
If we were hit by a South Wind or a West,
Which sink ships no matter what the great gods want?
No, let's give in to black night now
And make our supper. We'll stay by the ship,
Board her in the morning, and put out to sea.'

Thus Eurylochus, and the others agreed.
I knew then that some god had it in for us,
And my words had wings:

'Eurylochus,
It's all of you against me alone. All right,
But swear me a great oath, every last man:
If we find any cattle or sheep on this island,
No man will kill a single cow or sheep
In his recklessness, but will be content
To eat the food immortal Circe gave us.'

They swore they would do just as I said,
And when they had finished the words of the oath,
We moored our ship in a hollow harbor
Near a sweet-water spring. The crew disembarked
And skilfully prepared their supper.
When they had their fill of food and drink,
They fell to weeping, remembering how Scylla
Had snatched their shipmates and devoured them.
Sweet sleep came upon them as they wept.
Past midnight, when the stars had wheeled around,
Zeus gathered the clouds and roused a great wind
Against us, an ungodly tempest that shrouded
Land and sea and blotted out the night sky.
At the first blush of Dawn we hauled our ship up
And made her fast in a cave where you could see
The nymphs' beautiful seats and dancing places.
Then I called my men together and spoke to them:

'Friends, there is food and drink in the ship.
Let's play it safe and keep our hands
Off those cattle, which belong to Helios,
A dread god who hears and sees all.'

So I spoke, and their proud hearts consented.
Then for a full month the South Wind blew,
And no other wind but the East and the South.
As long as my men had grain and red wine
They didn't touch the cattle—life was still worth living.
But when all the rations from the ship were gone,
They had to roam around in search of game—
Hunting for birds and whatever they could catch
With fishing hooks. Hunger gnawed at their bellies.

I went off by myself up the island
To pray to the gods to show me the way.
When I had put some distance between myself
And the crew, and found a spot

Sheltered from the wind, I washed my hands
And prayed to the gods, but all they did
Was close my eyelids in sleep.

345

Meanwhile,

Eurylochus was giving bad advice to the crew:

'Listen to me, shipmates; despite your distress,
All forms of death are hateful, but to die
Of hunger is the most wretched way to go.

350

What are we waiting for? Let's drive off
The prime beef in that herd and offer sacrifice
To the gods of broad heaven. If we ever

355

Return to Ithaca, we will build a rich temple
To Hyperion the Sun, and deposit there

Many fine treasures. If he becomes angry
Over his cattle and gets the other gods' consent
To destroy our ship, well, I would rather

360

Gulp down saltwater and die once and for all
Than waste away slowly on a desert island.'

Thus Eurylochus, and the others agreed.

In no time they had driven off the best

Of Helios' cattle, pretty, spiral-horned cows
That were grazing close to our dark-prowed ship.

365

They surrounded these cows and offered prayers
To the gods, plucking off tender leaves
From a high-crowned oak in lieu of white barley,

370

Of which there was none aboard our benched ship.
They said their prayers, cut the cows' throats,
Flayed the animals and carved out the thigh joints,

Wrapped these in a double layer of fat
And laid all the raw bits upon them.

They had no wine to pour over the sacrifice
And so used water as they roasted the entrails.

375

When the thighs were burned and the innards tasted,
They carved up the rest and skewered it on spits.

That's when I awoke, bolting upright.

I started down to the shore, and as I got near the ship
The aroma of sizzling fat drifted up to me.

380

I groaned and cried out to the undying gods:

'Father Zeus, and you other immortals,

You lulled me to sleep—and to my ruin—

While my men committed this monstrous crime!'

Lampetie rushed in her long robes to Helios

And told him that we had killed his cattle.

Furious, the Sun God addressed the immortals:

385

'Father Zeus, and you other gods eternal,
Punish Odysseus' companions, who have insolently
Killed the cattle I took delight in seeing
Whenever I ascended the starry heaven
And whenever I turned back from heaven to earth.
If they don't pay just atonement for the cows
I will sink into Hades and shine on the dead.'

390

And Zeus, who masses the clouds, said:

395

'Helios, you go on shining among the gods
And for mortal men on the grain-giving earth.
I will soon strike their ship with sterling lightning
And shatter it to bits on the wine-purple sea.'

All this I heard from rich-haired Calypso,
Who said she heard it from Hermes the Guide.

400

When I reached the ship I chewed out my men,
Giving each one an earful. But there was nothing
We could do. The cattle were already dead.

Then the gods showed some portents
Directed at my men. The hides crawled,

405

And the meat, both roasted and raw,
Moored on the spits, like cattle lowing.

Each day for six days my men slaughtered oxen
From Helios' herd and gorged on the meat.

But when Zeus brought the seventh day,
The wind tailed off from gale force.

410

We boarded ship at once and put out to sea

As soon as we had rigged the mast and sail.
When we left the island behind, there was

No other land in sight, only sea and sky.

415

Then Zeus put a black cloud over our ship
And the sea grew dark beneath it. She ran on

A little while, and then the howling West Wind
Blew in with hurricane force. It snapped

Both forestays, and the mast fell backward
Into the bilge with all of its tackle.

420

On its way down the mast struck the helmsman

And crushed his skull. He fell from the stern
Like a diver, and his proud soul left his bones.

In the same instant, Zeus thundered
And struck the ship with a lightning bolt.

425

She shivered from stem to stern and was filled
With sulfurous smoke. My men went overboard.

Bobbing in the waves like sea crows

Around the black ship, their day of return
Snuffed out by the Sun God.

430

I kept pacing the deck until the sea surge

Tore the sides from the keel. The waves
Drove the bare keel on and snapped the mast
From its socket; the leather backstay
Was still attached, and I used this to lash
The keel to the mast. Perched on these timbers
I was swept along by deathly winds.

435

Then the West Wind died down,
And, to my horror, the South Wind rose.
All that way, back to the whirlpool,

440

I was swept along the whole night through
And at dawn reached Scylla's cliff
And dread Charybdis. She was sucking down
Seawater, and I leapt up

445

To the tall fig tree, grabbed hold of it
And hung on like a bat. I could not
Plant my feet or get myself set on the tree
Because its roots spread far below

450

And its branches were high overhead,
Long, thick limbs that shaded Charybdis.
I just grit my teeth and hung on
Until she spat out the mast and keel again.

455

It seemed like forever. Finally,
About the hour a man who has spent the day
Judging quarrels that young men bring to him
Rises from the marketplace and goes to dinner,
My ship's timbers surfaced again from Charybdis.

460

I let go with my hands and feet
And hit the water hard beyond the spars.
Once aboard, I rowed away with my hands.
As for Scylla, Zeus never let her see me,
Or I would have been wiped out completely.

465

I floated on for nine days ~~On~~ the tenth night
The gods brought me to ~~Ogygia~~
And to Calypso, the dread, beautiful goddess.
~~Who loved me and took care of me.~~
But I have told that tale only yesterday,
Here in your hall, to yourself and your wife,
And I wouldn't bore you by telling it again."

470

BOOK XIII

Odysseus finished his story,
And they were all spellbound, hushed
To silence throughout the shadowy hall.
Until Alcinous found his voice and said:

"Odysseus, now that you have come to my house,
High-roofed and founded on bronze, I do not think

5

You will be blown off course again
Before reaching home.

Hear now my command,
All who drink the glowing wine of Elders
Daily in my halls and hear the harper sing:
Clothes for our guest lie in a polished sea-chest,
Along with richly wrought gold and all the other gifts
The Phaeacian lords have brought to the palace.
But now each man of us gives him a cauldron, too.
We will recoup ourselves later with a general tax.
It is hard to make such generous gifts alone."

15

They were all pleased with what Alcinous said.
Each man went to his own house to sleep,
And when Dawn's rosy fingers appeared in the sky
They hurried to the ship with their gifts of bronze.
Alcinous, the sacred king himself, went on board
And stowed them away beneath the benches
Where they would not hinder the rowers' efforts.
Then they all went back to feast in the palace.

20

In their honor Alcinous sacrificed an ox
To Zeus, the Dark Cloud, who rules over all.
They roasted the haunches and feasted gloriously
While the godlike harper, honored Demodocus,
Sang in their midst.

25

But Odysseus
Kept turning his head toward the shining sun,
Urging it down the sky. He longed to set forth.

30

*A man who has been in the fields all day
With his wooden plow and wine-faced oxen
Longs for supper and welcomes the sunset
That sends him homeward with weary knees.*

35

So welcome to Odysseus was the evening sun.
As soon as it set he addressed the Phaeacians,
Alcinous especially, and his words had wings:

"Lord Alcinous, I bid you and your people
To pour libation and send me safely on my way.
And I bid you farewell. All is now here
That my heart has desired—passage home
And cherished gifts that the gods in heaven
Have blessed me with. When I reach home
May I find my wife and loved ones unharmed.
May you enjoy your wife and children here,

45