'You think we are headed home, our own dear land? Well, Circe sets us a rather different course . . . down to the House of Death and the awesome one, Persephone, there to consult the ghost of Tiresias, seer of Thebes.'

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

Back to the swift ship at the water's edge we went, our spirits deep in anguish, faces wet with tears. But Circe got to the dark hull before us, tethered a ram and black ewe close by—slipping past unseen. Who can glimpse a god who wants to be invisible gliding here and there?"
And she made the outer limits, the Ocean River's bounds where Cimmerian people have their homes—their realm and city shrouded in mist and cloud. The eye of the Sun can never flash his rays through the dark and bring them light, not when he climbs the starry skies or when he wheels back down from the heights to touch the earth once more—an endless, deathly night overhangs those wretched men.

There, gaining that point, we beached our craft and herding out the sheep, we picked our way by the Ocean's banks until we gained the place that Circe made our goal.

Here at the spot Perimedes and Eurylochus held the victims fast, and I, drawing my sharp sword from beside my hip, dug a trench of about a forearm's depth and length and around it poured libations out to all the dead, first with milk and honey, and then with mellow wine, then water third and last, and sprinkled glistening barley over it all, and time and again I vowed to all the dead, to the drifting, listless spirits of their ghosts. that once I returned to Ithaca I would slaughter a barren heifer in my halls, the best I had, and load a pyre with treasures—and to Tiresias, alone, apart, I would offer a sleek black ram, the pride of all my herds. And once my vows and prayers had invoked the nations of the dead, I took the victims, over the trench I cut their throats and the dark blood flowed in—and up out of Erebus they came, flocking toward me now, the ghosts of the dead and gone... Brides and unwed youths and old men who had suffered much and girls with their tender hearts freshly scarred by sorrow and great armies of battle dead, stabbed by bronze spears, men of war still wrapped in bloody armor—thousands swarming around the trench from every side—unearthly cries—blanching terror gripped me!

I ordered the men at once to flay the sheep that lay before us, killed by my ruthless blade, and burn them both, and then say prayers to the gods, to the almighty god of death and dread Persephone. But I, the sharp sword drawn from beside my hip, sat down on alert there and never let the ghosts of the shambling, shiftless dead come near that blood till I had questioned Tiresias myself.

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

My comrade groaned as he offered me an answer: 'Royal son of Laertes, Odysseus, old campaigner, the doom of an angry god, and god knows how much wine—they were my ruin, captain... I'd bedded down on the roof of Circe's house but never thought to climb back down again by the long ladder—headfirst from the roof I plunged, my neck snapped from the backbone, my soul flew down to Death. Now, I beg you by those you left behind, so far from here, your wife, your father who bred and reared you as a boy, and Telemachus, left at home in your halls, your only son. Well I know when you leave this lodging of the dead that you and your ship will put ashore again at the island of Aeaea—then and there, my lord, remember me, I beg you! Don't sail off and desert me, left behind unwept, unburied, don't, or my curse may draw god's fury on your head. No, burn me in full armor, all my harness, heap my mound by the churning gray surf—a man whose luck ran out—so even men to come will learn my story.'
Perform my rites, and plant on my tomb that oar
I swung with mates when I rowed among the living.'

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

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

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

At last he came. The shade of the famous Theban prophet,
holding a golden scepter, knew me at once and hailed me:
'Royal son of Laertes, Odysseus, master of exploits,
man of pain, what now, what brings you here,
forsaking the light of day
to see this joyless kingdom of the dead?
Stand back from the trench—put up your sharp sword
so I can drink the blood and tell you all the truth.'

Moving back, I thrust my silver-studded sword
deep in its sheath, and once he had drunk the dark blood
the words came ringing from the prophet in his power:
'A sweet smooth journey home, renowned Odysseus,
that is what you seek
but a god will make it hard for you—I know—
you will never escape the one who shakes the earth,
quaking with anger at you still, still enraged
because you blinded the Cyclops, his dear son.
Even so, you and your crew may still reach home,
suffering all the way, if you only have the power
to curb their wild desire and curb your own, what's more,
from the day your good trim vessel first puts in
at Thrinacia Island, flees the cruel blue sea.
There you will find them grazing,
herds and fat flocks, the cattle of Helios,
god of the sun who sees all, hears all things.
Leave the beasts unharmed, your mind set on home,
and you all may still reach Ithaca—bent with hardship,
true—but harm them in any way, and I can see it now:
your ship destroyed, your men destroyed as well.
And even if you escape, you'll come home late
and come a broken man—all shipmates lost,
alone in a stranger's ship—
and you will find a world of pain at home,
crude, arrogant men devouring all your goods,
courting your noble wife, offering gifts to win her.
No doubt you will pay them back in blood when you come home!
But once you have killed those suitors in your halls—
by stealth or in open fight with slashing bronze—
go forth once more, you must . . .
carry your well-planed oar until you come
to a race of people who know nothing of the sea,
whose food is never seasoned with salt, strangers all
to ships with their crimson prows and long slim oars,
wings that make ships fly. And here is your sign—
unmistakable, clear, so clear you cannot miss it:
When another traveler falls in with you and calls
that weight across your shoulder a fan to winnow grain,
then plant your bladed, balanced oar in the earth
and sacrifice fine beasts to the lord god of the sea,
Poseidon—a ram, a bull and a ramping wild boar—
then journey home and render noble offerings up
to the deathless gods who rule the vaulting skies,
to all the gods in order.
And at last your own death will steal upon you . . .
a gentle, painless death, far from the sea it comes
to take you down, borne down with the years in ripe old age
with all your people there in blessed peace around you.
All that I have told you will come true.'

‘Oh Tiresias,'

I replied as the prophet finished, ‘surely the gods have spun this out as fate, the gods themselves. But tell me one thing more, and tell me clearly. I see the ghost of my long-lost mother here before me. Dead, crouching close to the blood in silence, she cannot bear to look me in the eyes—her own son—or speak a word to me. How, lord, can I make her know me for the man I am?’

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

And with those words, now that his prophecies had closed, the awesome shade of lord Tiresias strode back to the House of Death. But I kept watch there, steadfast till my mother approached and drank the dark, clouding blood. She knew me at once and wailed out in grief and her words came winging toward me, flying home:

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

‘Mother,' I replied, ‘I had to venture down to the House of Death, to consult the shade of Tiresias, seer of Thebes. Never yet have I neared Achaea, never once set foot on native ground, always wandering—endless hardship from that day
nor did some hateful illness strike me, that so often devastates the body, drains our limbs of power. No, it was my longing for you, my shining Odysseus—you and your quickness, you and your gentle ways—that tore away my life that had been sweet.'

And I, my mind in turmoil, how I longed to embrace my mother's spirit, dead as she was! Three times I rushed toward her, desperate to hold her, three times she fluttered through my fingers, sifting away like a shadow, dissolving like a dream, and each time the grief cut to the heart, sharper, yes, and I, I cried out to her, words winging into the darkness: 'Mother—why not wait for me? How I long to hold you!—so even here, in the House of Death, we can fling our loving arms around each other, take some joy in the tears that numb the heart. Or is this just some wraith that great Persephone sends my way to make me ache with sorrow all the more?'

My noble mother answered me at once: 'My son, my son, the unluckiest man alive! This is no deception sent by Queen Persephone, this is just the way of mortals when we die. Sinews no longer bind the flesh and bones together—the fire in all its fury burns the body down to ashes once life slips from the white bones, and the spirit, rustling, flitters away... flown like a dream. But you must long for the daylight. Go, quickly. Remember all these things so one day you can tell them to your wife.'

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

And the first I saw there? Tyro, born of kings, who said her father was that great lord Salomeus, said that she was the wife of Cretheus, Aeolus' son. And once she fell in love with the river god, Enipeus, far the clearest river flowing across the earth, and so she'd haunt Enipeus' glinting streams, till taking his shape one day the god who girds the earth and makes it tremble bedded her where the swirling river rushes out to sea, and a surging wave reared up, high as a mountain, dark, arching over to hide the god and mortal girl together. Loosing her virgin belt, he lapped her round in sleep and when the god had consummated his work of love he took her by the hand and hailed her warmly: 'Rejoice in our love, my lady! And when this year has run its course you will give birth to glorious children—bedding down with the gods is never barren, futile—and you must tend them, breed and rear them well. Now home you go, and restrain yourself, I say, never breathe your lover's name but know—I am Poseidon, god who rocks the earth!'

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

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

And I saw Alcmena next, Amphitryon’s wife, who slept in the clasp of Zeus and merged in love and brought forth Heracles, rugged will and lion heart. And I saw Megara too, magnanimous Creon’s daughter wed to the stalwart Heracles, the hero never daunted.

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

And I saw magnificent Chloris, the one whom Neleus wooed and won with a hoard of splendid gifts, so dazzled by her beauty years ago . . . the youngest daughter of Iasus’ son Amphion, the great Minyan king who ruled Orchomenos once. She was his queen in Pylos, she bore him shining sons, Nestor and Chromius, Periclymenus too, good prince. And after her sons she bore a daughter, majestic Pero, the marvel of her time, courted by all the young lords round about. But Neleus would not give her to any suitor, none but the man who might drive home the herds that powerful Iphiclus had stolen. Lurching, broad in the brow, those longhorned beasts, and no small task to round them up from Phylace.

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

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

And I saw Iphimedeia next, Aloeus’ wife, who claimed she lay in the Sea-lord’s loving waves and gave the god two sons, but they did not live long. Otus staunch as a god and far-famed Ephialtes. They were the tallest men the fertile earth has borne, the handsomest too, by far, aside from renowned Orion. Nine yards across they measured, even at nine years old, nine fathoms tall they towered. They even threatened the deathless gods they’d storm Olympus’ heights with the pounding rush and grinding shock of battle. They were wild to pile Ossa upon Olympus, then on Ossa Pelion dense with timber—their toeholds up the heavens. And they’d have won the day if they had reached peak strength but Apollo the son of Zeus, whom sleek-haired Leto bore, laid both giants low before their beards had sprouted, covering cheek and chin with a fresh crop of down.

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

And I saw Clymene, Maera and loathsome Eriphyle—
 bribed with a golden necklace
to lure her lawful husband to his death...
But the whole cortège I could never tally, never name,
not all the daughters and wives of great men I saw there.
Long before that, the godsent night would ebb away.
But the time has come for sleep, either with friends
aboard your swift ship or here in your own house.
My passage home will rest with the gods and you.”

Odysseus paused... They all fell silent, hushed,
his story holding them spellbound down the shadowed halls
till the white-armed queen Arete suddenly burst out,
"Phaeacians! How does this man impress you now,
his looks, his build, the balanced mind inside him?
The stranger is my guest
but each of you princes shares the honor here.
So let’s not be too hasty to send him on his way,
and don’t scrimp on his gifts. His need is great,
great as the riches piled up in your houses,
thanks to the gods’ good will.”

Following her,
the old revered Echeneus added his support,
the eldest lord on the island of Phaeacia:
“Friends, the words of our considerate queen—
they never miss the mark or fail our expectations.
So do as Arete says, though on Alcinous here
depend all words and action.”

“And so it will be”—
Alcinous stepped in grandly—"sure as I am alive
and rule our island men who love their oars!
Our guest, much as he longs for passage home,
must stay and wait it out here till tomorrow,
till I can collect his whole array of parting gifts.

His send-off rests with every noble here
but with me most of all:
I hold the reins of power in the realm.”

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

“Ah Odysseus,” Alcinous replied, “one look at you
and we know that you are no one who would cheat us—
no fraud, such as the dark soil breeds and spreads
across the face of the earth these days. Crowds of vagabonds
frame their lies so tightly none can test them. But you,
what grace you give your words, and what good sense within!
You have told your story with all a singer’s skill,
the miseries you endured, your great Achaeanstoo.
But come now, tell me truly: your godlike comrades—
did you see any heroes down in the House of Death,
any who sailed with you and met their doom at Troy?
The night’s still young. I’d say the night is endless.
For us in the palace now, it’s hardly time for sleep.
Keep telling us your adventures—they are wonderful.
I could hold out here till Dawn’s first light
if only you could bear, here in our halls,
to tell the tale of all the pains you suffered.”

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

No sooner had Queen Persephone driven off the ghosts of lovely women, scattering left and right, than forward marched the shade of Atreus' son Agamemnon, fraught with grief and flanked by all his comrades, troops of his men-at-arms who died beside him, who met their fate in lord Aegisthus' halls.

He knew me at once, as soon as he drank the blood, and wailed out, shrilly; tears sprang to his eyes, he thrust his arms toward me, keen to embrace me there—no use—the great force was gone, the strength lost forever, now, that filled his rippling limbs in the old days. I wept at the sight, my heart went out to the man, my words too, in a winging flight of pity:

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

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

for a wedding, banquet or groaning public feast.
You in your day have witnessed hundreds slaughtered, killed in single combat or killed in pitched battle, true, but if you'd laid eyes on this it would have wrenched your heart—how we sprawled by the mixing-bowl and loaded tables there, throughout the palace, the whole floor awash with blood.
But the death-cry of Cassandra, Priam's daughter—the most pitiful thing I heard! My treacherous queen, Clytemnestra, killed her over my body, yes, and I lifting my fists, beat them down on the ground, dying, dying, writhing around the sword.
But she, that whore, she turned her back on me, well on my way to Death—she even lacked the heart to seal my eyes with her hand or close my jaws.

there's nothing more deadly, bestial than a woman set on works like these—what a monstrous thing she plotted, slaughtered her own lawful husband! Why, I expected, at least, some welcome home from all my children, all my household slaves when I came sailing back again . . . But she— the queen hell-bent on outrage—bathes in shame not only herself but the whole breed of womankind, even the honest ones to come, forever down the years!'

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

'True, true,' Agamemnon's ghost kept pressing on, 'so even your own wife—never indulge her too far. Never reveal the whole truth, whatever you may know; just tell her a part of it, be sure to hide the rest.
Not that you, Odysseus, will be murdered by your wife.
HOMER: THE ODYSSEY

She's much too steady, her feelings run too deep, Icarius' daughter Penelope, that wise woman. She was a young bride, I well remember . . . we left her behind when we went off to war, with an infant boy she nestled at her breast. That boy must sit and be counted with the men now—happy man! His beloved father will come sailing home and see his son, and he will embrace his father, that is only right. But my wife—she never even let me feast my eyes on my own son; she killed me first, his father! I tell you this—bear it in mind, you must—when you reach your homeland steer your ship into port in secret, never out in the open . . . the time for trusting women's gone forever!

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

So we stood there, trading heartsick stories, deep in grief, as the tears streamed down our faces. But now there came the ghosts of Peleus' son Achilles, Patroclus, fearless Antilochus—and Great Ajax too, the first in stature, first in build and bearing of all the Argives after Peleus' matchless son. The ghost of the splendid runner knew me at once and hailed me with a flight of mournful questions: 'Royal son of Laertes, Odysseus, man of tactics, reckless friend, what next?'

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

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

But you, Achilles, there's not a man in the world more blest than you—there never has been, never will be one. Time was, when you were alive, we Argives honored you as a god, and now down here, I see, you lord it over the dead in all your power. So grieve no more at dying, great Achilles.'

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

So he grieved but I tried to lend him heart: 'About noble Peleus I can tell you nothing, but about your own dear son, Neoptolemus, I can report the whole story, as you wish. I myself, in my trim ship, I brought him out of Scyros to join the Argives under arms. And dug in around Troy, debating battle-tactics, he always spoke up first, and always on the mark—godlike Nestor and I alone excelled the boy. Yes, and when our armies fought on the plain of Troy he'd never hang back with the main force of men—he'd always charge ahead, giving ground to no one in his fury, and scores of men he killed in bloody combat. How could I list them all, name them all, now, the fighting ranks he leveled, battling for the Argives? But what a soldier he laid low with a bronze sword: the hero Eurytylus, Telephus' son, and round him troops of his own Cetean comrades slaughtered, lured to war by the bribe his mother took. The only man I saw to put Eurytylus in the shade was Memnon, son of the Morning. Again, when our champions climbed inside the horse that Epeus built with labor, and I held full command to spring our packed ambush open or keep it sealed, all our lords and captains were wiping off their tears, knees shaking beneath each man—but not your son. Never once did I see his glowing skin go pale; he never flicked a tear from his cheeks, no, he kept on begging me there to let him burst from the horse, kept gripping his hilted sword, his heavy bronze-tipped javelin, keen to loose his fighting fury against the Trojans. Then, once we'd sacked King Priam's craggy city, laden with his fair share and princely prize
He stalked off toward Erebus, into the dark to join the other lost, departed dead. Yet now, despite his anger, he might have spoken to me, or I to him, but the heart inside me stirred with some desire to see the ghosts of others dead and gone.

And I saw Minos there, illustrious son of Zeus, firmly enthroned, holding his golden scepter, judging all the dead . . . Some on their feet, some seated, all clustering round the king of justice, pleading for his verdicts reached in the House of Death with its all-embracing gates.

I next caught sight of Orion, that huge hunter, rounding up on the fields of asphodel those wild beasts the man in life cut down on the lonely mountain-slopes, brandishing in his hands the bronze-studded club that time can never shatter.

I saw Tityus too, son of the mighty goddess Earth—sprawling there on the ground, spread over nine acres—two vultures hunched on either side of him, digging into his liver, beaking deep in the blood-sac, and he with his frantic hands could never beat them off, for he had once dragged off the famous consort of Zeus in all her glory, Leto, threading her way toward Pytho’s ridge, over the lovely dancing-rings of Panopeus.

And I saw Tantalus too, bearing endless torture. He stood erect in a pool as the water lapped his chin—parched, he tried to drink, but he could not reach the surface, no, time and again the old man stooped, craving a sip, time and again the water vanished, swallowed down, laying bare the caked black earth at his feet—some spirit drank it dry. And over his head leafy trees dangled their fruit from high aloft, pomegranates and pears, and apples glowing red, succulent figs and olives swelling sleek and dark, but as soon as the old man would strain to clutch them fast a gust would toss them up to the lowering dark clouds.

And I saw Sisyphus too, bound to his own torture, grappling his monstrous boulder with both arms working, heaving, hands struggling, legs driving, he kept on thrusting the rock uphill toward the brink, but just as it teetered, set to topple over—time and again the immense weight of the thing would wheel it back and the ruthless boulder would bound and tumble down to the plain again—so once again he would heave, would struggle to thrust it up, sweat drenching his body, dust swirling above his head.

And next I caught a glimpse of powerful Heracles—his ghost, I mean: the man himself delights in the grand feasts of the deathless gods on high, wed to Hebe, famed for her lithe, alluring ankles, the daughter of mighty Zeus and Hera shod in gold. Around him cries of the dead rang out like cries of birds, scattering left and right in horror as on he came like night, naked bow in his grip, an arrow grooved on the bowstring, glaring round him fiercely, forever poised to shoot. A terror too, that sword-belt sweeping across his chest, a baldric of solid gold emblazoned with awesome work . . . bears and ramping boars and lions with wild, fiery eyes, and wars, routs and battles, massacres, butchered men. May the craftsman who forged that masterpiece—whose skills could conjure up a belt like that—never forge another!

Heracles knew me at once, at first glance, and hailed me with a winging burst of pity: 'Royal son of Laertes, Odysseus famed for exploits, luckless man, you too? Braving out a fate as harsh as the fate I bore, alive in the light of day? Son of Zeus that I was, my torments never ended, forced to slave for a man not half the man I was:
he saddled me with the worst heartbreaking labors. Why, he sent me down here once, to retrieve the hound that guards the dead—no harder task for me, he thought—but I dragged the great beast up from the underworld to earth and Hermes and gleaming-eyed Athena blazed the way!' With that he turned and back he went to the House of Death but I held fast in place, hoping that others might still come, shades of famous heroes, men who died in the old days and ghosts of an even older age I longed to see, Theseus and Pirithous, the gods’ own radiant sons. But before I could, the dead came surging round me, hordes of them, thousands raising unearthly cries, and blanching terror gripped me—panicked now that Queen Persephone might send up from Death some monstrous head, some Gorgon’s staring face! I rushed back to my ship, commanded all hands to take to the decks and cast off cables quickly. They swung aboard at once, they sat to the oars in ranks and a strong tide of the Ocean River swept her on downstream, sped by our rowing first, then by a fresh fair wind."

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

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