

'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.'

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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?"

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## The Kingdom of the Dead

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

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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— 20  
 an endless, deadly night overhangs those wretched men.  
 There, gaining that point, we beached our craft  
 and herding out the sheep, we picked our way  
 by the Ocean's banks until we gained the place  
 that Circe made our goal.

Here at the spot

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, 30  
 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 40  
 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, 50

and burn them both, and then say prayers to the gods,  
 to the almighty god of death and dread Persephone.  
 But I, the sharp sword drawn from beside my hip,  
 sat down on alert there and never let the ghosts  
 of the shambling, shiftless dead come near that blood  
 till I had questioned Tiresias myself.

But first

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

My comrade groaned as he offered me an answer:  
 'Royal son of Laertes, Odysseus, old campaigner,  
 the doom of an angry god, and god knows how much wine—  
 they were my ruin, captain . . . I'd bedded down  
 on the roof of Circe's house but never thought 70  
 to climb back down again by the long ladder—  
 headfirst from the roof I plunged, my neck snapped  
 from the backbone, my soul flew down to Death. Now,  
 I beg you by those you left behind, so far from here,  
 your wife, your father who bred and reared you as a boy,  
 and 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 Aeaëa—then and there,  
 my lord, remember me, I beg you! Don't sail off  
 and desert me, left behind unwept, unburied, don't, 80  
 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, 90  
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, 100  
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: 110  
'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 120  
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, 130  
alone in a stranger's ship—  
and you will find a world of pain at home,  
crude, arrogant men devouring all your goods,  
courting your noble wife, offering gifts to win her.  
No doubt you will pay them back in blood when you come home!  
But once you have killed those suitors in your halls—  
by stealth or in open fight with slashing bronze—  
go forth once more, you must . . .  
carry your well-planed oar until you come  
to a race of people who know nothing of the sea, 140  
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 150  
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?'

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'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,

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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?'

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'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

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I first set sail with King Agamemnon bound for Troy,  
the stallion-land, to fight the Trojans there.  
But tell me about yourself and spare me nothing.  
What form of death overcame you, what laid you low,  
some long slow illness? Or did Artemis showering arrows  
come with her painless shafts and bring you down?  
Tell me of father, tell of the son I left behind:  
do my royal rights still lie in their safekeeping?  
Or does some stranger hold the throne by now  
because men think that I'll come home no more?  
Please, tell me about my wife, her turn of mind,  
her thoughts . . . still standing fast beside our son,  
still guarding our great estates, secure as ever now?  
Or has she wed some other countryman at last,  
the finest prince among them?'

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'Surely, surely,'

my noble mother answered quickly, 'she's still waiting  
there in your halls, poor woman, suffering so,  
her life an endless hardship like your own . . .  
wasting away the nights, weeping away the days.  
No one has taken over your royal rights, not yet.  
Telemachus still holds your great estates in peace,  
he attends the public banquets shared with all,  
the feasts a man of justice should enjoy,  
for every lord invites him. As for your father,  
he keeps to his own farm—he never goes to town—  
with no bed for him there, no blankets, glossy throws;  
all winter long he sleeps in the lodge with servants,  
in the ashes by the fire, his body wrapped in rags.  
But when summer comes and the bumper crops of harvest,  
any spot on the rising ground of his vineyard rows  
he makes his bed, heaped high with fallen leaves,  
and there he lies in anguish . . .  
with his old age bearing hard upon him, too,  
and his grief grows as he longs for your return.  
And I with the same grief, I died and met my fate.  
No sharp-eyed Huntress showering arrows through the halls  
approached and brought me down with painless shafts,

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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,

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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 Salmoneus,  
 said that she was the wife of Cretheus, Aeolus' son. 270  
 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 280  
 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, 290  
 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. 300

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!* 310  
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 . . . 320  
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, 330  
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. 340

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, 350  
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 360  
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 370  
to lure her lawful husband to his death . . .  
But the whole cortege I could never tally, never name,  
not all the daughters and wives of great men I saw there.  
Long before that, the godsent night would ebb away.  
But the time has come for sleep, either with friends  
aboard your swift ship or here in your own house.  
My passage home will rest with the gods and you."

Odysseus paused . . . They all fell silent, hushed,  
his story holding them spellbound down the shadowed halls 380  
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: 390  
"Friends, the words of our considerate queen—  
they never miss the mark or fail our expectations.  
So do as Arete says, though on Alcinoos here  
depend all words and action."

"And so it will be"—  
Alcinoos 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 400  
but with me most of all:  
I hold the reins of power in the realm."

Odysseus, deft and tactful, echoed back,  
"Alcinoos, majesty, shining among your island people,  
if you would urge me now to stay here one whole year  
then speed me home weighed down with lordly gifts,  
I'd gladly have it so. Better by far, that way.  
The fuller my arms on landing there at home,  
the more respected, well received I'd be  
by all who saw me sailing back to Ithaca." 410

"Ah Odysseus," Alcinoos 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 Achaeans too.  
But come now, tell me truly: your godlike comrades—  
did you see any heroes down in the House of Death, 420  
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:  
"Alcinoos, majesty, shining among your island people,  
there is a time for many words, a time for sleep as well. 430  
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.

Now then,

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

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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.

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So,

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

490

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.

500



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

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

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

So we stood there, trading heartsick stories,  
 deep in grief, as the tears streamed down our faces.  
 But now there came the ghosts of Peleus' son Achilles,  
 Patroclus, 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?

510

520

530

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,

570

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, 580  
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: 590  
the hero Eurypylos, 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 Eurypylos  
in the shade was Memnon, son of the Morning.  
Again, when our champions climbed inside the horse  
that Epeus built with labor, and I held full command  
to spring our packed ambush open or keep it sealed,  
all our lords and captains were wiping off their tears,  
knees shaking beneath each man—but not your son. 600  
Never once did I see his glowing skin go pale;  
he never flicked a tear from his cheeks, no,  
he kept on begging me there to let him burst  
from the horse, kept gripping his hilted sword,  
his heavy bronze-tipped javelin, keen to loose  
his fighting fury against the Trojans. Then,  
once we'd sacked King Priam's craggy city,  
laden with his fair share and princely prize

he boarded his own ship, his body all unscarred.  
Not a wound from a flying spear or a sharp sword,  
cut-and-thrust close up—the common marks of war. 610  
Random, raging Ares plays no favorites.'

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

Now the rest of the ghosts, the dead and gone  
came swarming up around me—deep in sorrow there,  
each asking about the grief that touched him most.  
Only the ghost of Great Ajax, son of Telamon, 620  
kept his distance, blazing with anger at me still  
for the victory I had won by the ships that time  
I pressed my claim for the arms of Prince Achilles.  
His queenly mother had set them up as prizes,  
Pallas and captive Trojans served as judges.  
Would to god I'd never won such trophies!  
All for them the earth closed over Ajax,  
that proud hero Ajax . . .  
greatest in build, greatest in works of war  
of all the Argives after Peleus' matchless son. 630  
I cried out to him now, I tried to win him over:  
'Ajax, son of noble Telamon, still determined,  
even in death, not once to forget that rage  
you train on me for those accursed arms?  
The gods set up that prize to plague the Achaeans—  
so great a tower of strength we lost when you went down!  
For *your* death we grieved as we did for Achilles' death—  
we grieved incessantly, true, and none's to blame  
but Zeus, who hated Achaea's fighting spearmen  
so intensely, Zeus sealed your doom. 640  
Come closer, king, and listen to my story.  
Conquer your rage, your blazing, headstrong pride!'

So I cried out but Ajax answered not a word.

He stalked off toward Erebus, into the dark  
to join the other lost, departed dead.  
Yet now, despite his anger,  
he might have spoken to me, or I to him,  
but the heart inside me stirred with some desire  
to see the ghosts of others dead and gone.

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.

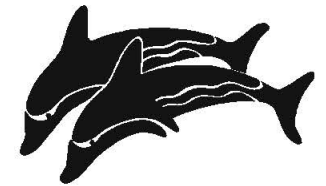
And next I caught a glimpse of powerful Heracles—  
his ghost, I mean: the man himself delights  
in the grand feasts of the deathless gods on high,  
wed to Hebe, famed for her lithe, alluring ankles,  
the daughter of mighty Zeus and Hera shod in gold.  
Around him cries of the dead rang out like cries 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.”

720

730



## The Cattle of the Sun

“**N**ow 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,

10