In the One-Eyed Giant’s Cave

Odysseus, the great teller of tales, launched out on his story:

"Alcinous, majesty, shining among your island people,
what a fine thing it is to listen to such a bard
as we have here—the man sings like a god.
The crown of life, I'd say. There's nothing better
than when deep joy holds sway throughout the realm
and banqueters up and down the palace sit in ranks,
enthralled to hear the bard, and before them all, the tables
heaped with bread and meats. And drawing wine from a mixing-bowl
the steward makes his rounds and keeps the wine cups flowing.
This, to my mind, is the best that life can offer.

But now
you're set on probing the bitter pains I've borne,
so I'm to weep and grieve, it seems, still more.
Well then, what shall I go through first."
what shall I save for last?
What pains—the gods have given me my share.
Now let me begin by telling you my name . . .
so you may know it well and I in times to come,
if I can escape the fatal day, will be your host,
your sworn friend, though my home is far from here.
I am Odysseus, son of Laertes, known to the world
for every kind of craft—my fame has reached the skies.
Sunny Ithaca is my home. Atop her sands our seamark,
Mount Nettos’ leafy ridges shimmers in the wind.
Around her a ring of islands circle side-by-side.
Dulichion, Same, wooded Zacynthus too, but mine
lies low and away, the farthest out to sea,
rearing into the western dusk
while the others face the east and breaking day.
Mine is a rugged land but good for raising sons—
and I myself, I know no sweeter sight on earth
than a man’s own native country.
True enough.
Calypso the lustrous goddess tried to hold me back,
deep in her arching caverns, craving me for a husband.
So did Circe, holding me just as warmly in her halls,
the bewitching queen of Aeaea keen to have me too.
But they never won the heart inside me, never.
So nothing is as sweet as a man’s own country,
his own parents, even though he’s settled down
in some luxurious house, off in a foreign land
and far from those who bore him.

No more. Come, let me tell you about the voyage fraught with hardship
Zeus inflicted on me, homeward bound from Troy . . .
The wind drove me out of Ilumon to Ithamar,
the Cicones’ stronghold. There I sacked the city,
killed the men, but as for the wives and plunder,
that rich haul we dragged away from the place—
we shared it round so no one, not on my account,
would go deprived of his fair share of spoils.

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Then I urged them to cut and run, set sail,
but would they listen? Not those mutinous fools;
there was too much wine to swill, too many sheep to slaughter
down along the beach, and shambling longhorn cattle.
And all the while the Cicones sought out other Cicones,
called for help from their neighbors living inland:
a larger force, and stronger soldiers too.
Skilled hands at fighting men from chariots,
skilled, when a crisis broke, to fight on foot.
Out of the morning mist they came against us—
packed as the leaves and spears that flower forth in spring—
and Zeus presented us with disaster, me and my comrades
doomed to suffer blow on mortal blow. Lining up,
both armies battled it out against our swift ships,
both raked each other with hurrying bronze lances.
Long as morning rose and the blessed day grew stronger
we stood and fought them off, massed as they were, but then,
when the sun wheeled past the hour for unsheathing oxen,
the Cicones broke our lines and beat us down at last.

Out of each ship, six men-at-arms were killed;
the rest of us rowed away from certain doom.

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From there we sailed on, glad to escape our death
yet sick at heart for the dear companions we had lost.
But I would not let our rolling ships set sail until the crews
had raised the triple cry, saluting each poor comrade
cut down by the fierce Cicones on that plain.
Now Zeus who masses the stormclouds hit the fleet
with the North Wind—a howling, demoniac gale, shrouding over
in thunderheads the earth and sea at once—
and night swept down
from the sky and the ships went plunging headlong on.
our sails slashed to rage by the hurricane’s blast.
We struck them—cringing at death we rowed our ships
to the nearest shoreline, pulled with all our power.
There, for two nights, two days, we lay by, no letup,
rating our hearts out, bent with pain and bone-tired.
When Dawn with her lovely locks brought on the third day, then stepping the masts and hoisting white sails high, we lounged at the oarlocks, letting wind and helmsmen keep us true on course...  

And now, at long last, I might have reached my native land unscaled, but just as I doubled Malea's cape, a tide-rip and the North Wind drove me way off course carreering past Cythera.  

Nine whole days I was borne along by rough, deadly winds on the fish-infested sea. Then on the tenth our squadron reached the land of the Lotus-eaters, people who eat the lotus, mellow fruit and flower. We disembarked on the coast, drew water there and crewmen snatched a meal by the swift ships. Once we'd had our fill of food and drink I sent a detail ahead, two picked men and a third, a runner, to scout out who might live there—men like us perhaps, who live on bread? So off they went and soon enough they mingled among the natives, Lotus-eaters, Lotus-eaters who had no notion of killing my companions, not at all, they simply gave them the lotus to taste instead...  

Any crewmen who ate the lotus, the honey-sweet fruit, lost all desire to send a message back, much less return, their only wish to linger there with the Lotus-eaters, grazing on lotus, all memory of the journey home dissolved forever. But I brought them back, back to the hollow ships, and streaming tears—I forced them, hauled them under the rowing benches, lashed them last and shouted out commands to my other, steady comrades: "Quick, no time to lose, embark in the racing ships!"—so none could eat the lotus, forget the voyage home. They swung aboard at once, they sat to the oars in ranks and in rhythm churned the water white with stroke on stroke.  

From there we sailed on, our spirits now at a low ebb, and reached the land of the high and mighty Cyclops.
Well, here we landed, and surely a god steered us in through the pitch-black night.
Not that he ever showed himself, with thick fog swirling around the ships, the moons wrapped in clouds and not a glimmer stealing through that gloom.
Not one of us glimpsed the island—scanning hard—or the long combers rolling us slowly toward the coast, not till our ships had run their keels ashore.
Beaching our vessels smoothly, striking sail, the crews swung out on the low shelving sand and there we fell asleep, awaiting Dawn’s first light.

When young Dawn with her rose-red fingers shone once more we all turned out, intrigued to tour the island.
The local nymphs, the daughters of Zeus himself,
flushed mountain-goats so the crews could make their meal.
Quickly we fetched our curved bows and hunting spears from the ships and, splitting up into three bands, we started shooting, and soon enough some god had sent us bags of game to warm our hearts.
A dozen vessels sailed in my command and to each crew nine goats were shared out and mine alone took ten. Then all day long till the sun went down we sat and feasted well on sides of meat and rounds of hearty wine.
The good red stock in our vessels’ holds had not run out, there was still plenty left; the men had carried off a generous store in jars when we stormed and sacked the Cyclops’ holy city.
Now we stared across at the Cyclops’ shore, so near we could even see their smoke, hear their voices, their bleating sheep and goats...
And then when the sun had set and night came on we lay down and slept at the water’s shelving edge.
When young Dawn with her rose-red fingers shone once more I called a muster briskly, commanding all the hands, ‘The rest of you stay here, my friends-in-arms.’
No maid or man of his household knew that secret store, only himself, his loving wife and a single servant. Whenever they'd drink the deep-red mellow vintage, twenty cups of water he'd stir in one of wine and what an aroma wafted from the bowl—what magic, what a godsend!—so joy in holding back when that was poured! Filling a great goatskin now, I took this wine, provisions too in a leather sack. A sudden foreboding told my fighting spirit I'd soon come up against some giant clad in power like armor-plate—a savage deaf to justice, blind to law.

Our party quickly made its way to his cave but we failed to find our host himself inside; he was off in his pasture, sowing his sleek flocks. So we explored his den, gazing wide-eyed at it all, the large flat racks loaded with drying cheeses, the folds crowded with young lambs and kids, split into three groups—here the spring-born, here mid-yearlings, here the fresh sucklings off to the side—each sort was penned apart. And all his vessels, pails and hammered buckets he used for milking, were brimming full with whey. From the start my comrades pressed me, pleading hard, 'Let's make away with the cheeses, then come back—hurry, drive the lambs and kids from the pens to our swift ship, put out to sea at once!' But I would not give way—and how much better it would have been— not till I saw him, saw what gifts he'd give. But he proved to lovely sight to my companions.

There we built a fire, set our hands on the cheeses, offered some to the gods and ate the bulk ourselves and settled down inside, awaiting his return. And back he came from pasture, late in the day, herding his flocks home, and lugging a huge load of good dry logs to fuel his fire at supper. He flung them down in the cave—a jolting crash—we scuttled in panic into the deepest dark recess. And next he drove his sleek flocks into the open vault, all he'd milk at least, but he left the males outside, rams and billy goats out in the high-axed yard. Then to close his door he hoisted over a tremendous, massive slab—no twenty-two wagons, rugged and four-wheeled, could budge that boulder off the ground. I tell you, such an immense stone the monster wedged to block his cave! Then down he squatted to milk his sheep and blunting goats, each in order, and put a suckling underneath each dam. And half of the fresh white milk he curdled quickly, set it aside in wicker racks to press for cheese, the other half let stand in pails and buckets, ready at hand to wash his supper down. As soon as he'd briskly finished all his chores he lit his fire and spied us in the blaze and 'Strangers!' he thundered out, 'now who are you? Where did you sail from, ever the running sea-lanes? Out on a trading spree or roving the waves like pirates, sea-wolves raiding at will, who risk their lives to plunder other men?'

The hearts inside us shook, terrified by his rumbling voice and monstrous hulk. Nevertheless I found the nerve to answer, firmly, 'Men of Achaea we are and bound now from Troy! Driven far off course by the warring winds, over the vast gulf if the sea—battling home on a strange tack, a route that's off the map, and so we've come to you so it must please King Zeus's plotting heart. We're glad to say we're men of Attides Agamemnon, whose fame is the proudest thing on earth these days, so great a city he sacked, such multitudes he killed! But since we've chanced on you, we're at your knees in hopes of a warm welcome, even a guest-gift.
the sort that hosts give strangers. That's the custom.
Respect the gods, my friend. We're suppliants—at your mercy!
Zeus of the Strangers guards all guests and suppliants: strangers are sacred—Zeus will avenge their rights!

' Stranger,' he grumbled back from his brutal heart,
'you must be a fool, stranger, or come from nowhere,
telling me to fear the gods or avoid their wrath!
' We Cyclops never blink at Zeus and Zeus's shied
of storm and thunder, or any other blessed god—we've got more force by far.
I'd never spare you in fear of Zeus's hatred,
you or your comrades here, unless I had the urge.
But tell me, where did you moor your sturdy ship
when you arrived? Up the coast or close in?
I'd just like to know.'

So he laid his trap
but he never caught me, no, wise to the world
I shot back in my crafty way: 'My ship?
Poseidon god of the earthquake smashed my ship,
him he drove it against the rocks at your island's far cape,
him he dashed it against a cliff as the winds rode us in.
I and the men you see escaped a sudden death.'

Not a word in reply to that, the ruthless brute.
Lurching up, he lunged out with his hands toward my men
and snatching two at once, rapping them on the ground
he knocked them dead like pugs—
their brains burst out all over, soaked the floor—and ripping them limb from limb to fix his meal
he bolted them down like a mountain lion, left no scrap, devoured entrails, flesh and bones, marrow and all!
We flung our arms to Zeus, we wept and cried aloud,
looking on at his grisly work—paralyzed, appalled.
But once the Cyclops had stuffed his enormous gut
with human flesh, washing it down with raw milk,
he slept in his cave, stretched out along his flocks.
And I with my fighting heart, I thought at first

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I got the very ones I would have picked myself, four good men, and I in the lead made five...  

Nightfall brought him back, herding his woolly sheep and he quickly drove the herd into the vaulted cavern, round and all—none left outside in the walled yard—his own idea, perhaps, or a god led him on. Then he hoisted the huge slab to block the door and squatted to milk his sheep and bleating goats, each in order, putting a sucking underneath each dam, and as soon as he'd briskly finished all his chores he snatched up two more men and fixed his meal. But this time I lifted a carved wooden bowl, brimming with my ruddy wine, and went right up to the Cyclops, entitling, "Here, Cyclops, try this wine—to top off the banquet of human flesh you've hoisted down! Judge for yourself what stock our ship had stored. I brought it here to make you a fine libation, hoping you would pity me, Cyclops, send me home, but your rages are insufferable. You barbarian—how can any man on earth come visit you after this? What you've done outwages all that's right!"

At that he seized the bowl and tossed it off and the bravity wine pleased him immensely—"More"—he demanded a second bowl—a hearty helping! And tell me your name now, quickly, so I can hand my guest a gift to warm his heart. Our soil yields the Cyclops powerful, full-bodied wine and the rains from Zeus build its strength. But this, this is nectar, ambrosia—this flows from heaven!"

So he declared. I poured him another fiery bowl—three bowls I trimmed and three he drank to the last drop, the fool, and then, when the wine was swirling round his brain, I approached my host with a cordial, winning word: "So, you ask me the name I'm known by, Cyclops?

I will tell you. But you must give me a guest-gift as you've promised. Nobody—that's my name. Nobody—so my mother and father call me, all my friends.

But he boomed back at me from his ruthless heart. 'Nobody? I'll eat Nobody last of all his friends—I'll eat the others first! That's my gift to you!'

With that he toppled over, sprawled full-length, flat on his back and lay there, his massive neck slumping to one side, and slept that conquers all overwhelm'd him now as wine came spurring, flooding up from his gullet with chunks of human flesh—he vomited, blind drunk. Now, at last, I thrust our stake in a bed of embers to get it red-hot and rallied all my comrades: 'Courage—no panic, no one hang back now!' And green as it was, just as the olive stake was about to catch fire—the glow terrific, yes—

I dragged it from the flames, my men clustering round as some god breathed enormous courage through us all. Hoisting high that olive stake with its stabbing point, straight into the monster's eye they rammed it hard—

I drove my weight on it from above and bored it home as a shipwright bores his beam with a shipwright's drill that men below, whipping the strap back and forth, whirl and the drill keeps twisting faster, never stopping—So we seized our stake with its fiery tip and bored it round and round in the giant's eye till blood came boiling up around that smoking shaft and the hot blast singed his brow and eyelids round the core and the broiling eyeball burst—its cracking roots blazed and hissed—

as a blacksmith plunges a glowing ax or adze in an ice-cold bath and the metal screeches steam and its temper hardens—that's the iron's strength—so the eye of the Cyclops sizzled round that stake! He loosed a hideous roar, the rock walls echoed round
and we scuttled back in terror. The sonner wrenched the spike from his eye and out it came with a redeyer of blood—
he flung it aside with frantic hands, and mad with pain
he bellowed out for help from its neighbor Cyclops
living round about in caves on wind-swept crags.
Hearing his cries, they lumbered up from every side
and halking round his cavern, asked what ailed him:
'What, Polyphemus, what in the world's the trouble?
Roaring out I, the godson night to rob us of our sleep.
Surely none of you persons in your flocks against your will—
surely none of you trying to kill you now by fraud or force!'

'Nobody, friends—Polyphemus bellowed back from his cave—
'Nobody's killing me now by fraud and not by force!'

'If you're alone,' his friends boomed back at once,
and nobody's trying to overpower you now—look,
it must be a plague sent here by mighty Zeus
and there's no escape from that.
You'd better pray to your father, Lord Poseidon.'

They lumbered off, but laughter filled my heart
to think how nobody's name—my great cunning stroke—
had duped them one and all. But the Cyclops there,
still growling, raked with agony, groped around
for the huge slab, and heaving it from the doorway,
down he sat in the cave's mouth, his arms spread wide,
hoping to catch a comrade stealing out with sheep—
such a blithering fool he took me for!

for I was already plotting . . .
what was the best way out? how could I find
escape from death for my crew, myself as well?
My wits kept weaving, weaving cunning schemes—
life at stake, monstrous death staring us in the face—
till this plan struck my mind as best. That flock
those well-fed rams with their splendid thick fleece,
sturdy, handsome beasts sporting their dark weight of wool:

I lashed them abreast, quietly, twisting the wallow-twigs
the Cyclops slept on—giant, lawless brute—I took them
two by three; each ram in the middle bone a man
while the two rams either side would shield him well.
So three beasts to bear each man, but as for myself?
There was one bellower ram, the pride of all the flock,
and clutching him by his back, tucked up under
his shaggy belly, there I hung, face upward,
both hands locked in his marvelous deep fleece,
clinging for dear life, my spirit seared, enduring . . .
So we held on, desperate, wailing Dawn's first light.

As soon
as young Dawn with her rose-red fingers shone once more
the rams went rumbling out of the cave toward pasture,
the ewes kept bleating round the pens, unmilked,
their udders about to burst. Their master now,
heaving in torment, felt the back of each animal
brushing before him here, but the idiot never sensed
my men were tressed up under their thick fleecy ribs.
And last of them all came my great ram now, striding out,
weighed down with his dewy wool and my deep plots.
Stroking him gently, powerful Polyphemus murmured,
'Dear old ram, why last of the flock to quit the cave?
In the good old days you'd never lag behind the rest—
you with your long marching strides, first by far
of the flock to graze the fresh young grasses.
first by far to reach the rippling streams
first to turn back home, keen for your fold
when night comes on—but now you're last of all.
And why? Sick at heart for your master's eye
that onward gonged out with his wicked crew?—
only after he'd stunned my wits with wine—
that, that Nobody . . .

who's not escaped his death. I swear, not yet.
Oh it only you thought like me, had words like me
to tell me where that soundnel is clingning from my rage!
I'd smash him against the ground, I'd spill his brains—
flooded across my cave—and that would ease my heart of the pains that good-for-nothing Nobody made me suffer!"

And with that threat he let my ram go free outside. But soon as we’d got one foot past cave and courtyard, first I loosed myself from the ram, then loosed my men, then quickly, glancing back again and again we drove our flock, good ol’ uhm beasts with their long shanks, straight to the ship, and a welcome sight we were to loyal comrades—we who’d escaped our deaths—but for all the rest they broke down and wait at the door. I cut it short, I stopped each shipmate’s cries, my heart leaping, brooks frowning, silent signals to hurry, tumble our weary herd on board, launch out on the open sea! They swung aboard, they sat to the oars in ranks and in rhythm churned the water white with stroke on stroke. But once offshore as far as a man’s shout can carry, I called back to the Cyclops, stinging tautus:

"So, Cyclops, no weak coward it was whose crew you bent to devour there in your vaulted cave—
you with your brute force! Your filthy crimes came down on your own head, you shameless cannibal,
daring to eat your guests in your own house—
so Zeus and the other gods have paid you back!"

That made the rage of the monster boil over. Ripping off the peak of a towering crag, he heaved it so hard the boulder landed just in front of our dark prow and a huge swell reared up as the rock west plunging under—a tidal wave from the open sea. The sudden backwash drove us landward again, forcing us close ashore but grabbing a long pole, I thrust us off and away, tossing my head for dear life, signaling crew to put their backs in the oars, escape grim death. They threw themselves in the labor, rowed on fast but once we’d plowed the breakers twice as far, again I began to taunt the Cyclops—men around me trying to check me, calm me, left and right:

"So headstrong—why? Why rate the beast again?"

"That rock he flung in the sea just now, hurling our ship to shore once more—we thought we’d die on the spot!"

"If he’d caught a sound from one of us, just a moan,
he would have crushed our heads and ship timbers with one heave of another flashing, jagged rock!"

"Good god, the brute can throw!"

So they begged
but they could not bring my fighting spirit round.
I called back with another burst of anger, "Cyclops—
if any man on the face of the earth should ask you who blinded you, blamed you so—say Odysseus,
raider of cities, he gouged out your eye.
Laertes’ son who makes his home in Ithaca!"

So I vaunted and he groaned back in answer,

"Oh no, no—that prophecy years ago . . .
It all comes home to me with a vengeance now! We once had a prophet here, a great tall man
Telemus, Euryalus’ son, a master at reading signs, who grew old in his trade among his fellow-Cyclops.
All this, he warned me, would come to pass someday—
that I’d be blinded here at the hands of one Odysseus.
But I always looked for a handsome giant man to cross my path, some fighter clad in power like armor-plate, but now, look what a dwarf, a spineless good-for-nothing,
stuns me with wine, then gouges out my eye!
Come here, Odysseus, let me give you a guest-gift and urge Poseidon the earthquaker god to speed you home.
I am his son and he claims to be my father, true,
and he himself will heal me if he pleases—
no other blessed god, no man can do the work!"

"Heal you!—" here was my parting shot—"Would to god I could strip you
of life and breath and ship you down to the House of Death as surely as none one will ever heal your eye, not even your earthquake god himself!

But at that he twirled out to lord Poseidon, thrashing his arms to the starry skies, and prayed, 'Hear me—Poseidon, god of the sea-blue mane who rocks the earth! If I really am your son and you claim to be my father—come, grant that Odysseus, raider of cities, Laertes' son who makes his home in Ithaca, never reaches home. Or if he's fated to see his people once again and reach his well-built house and his own native country, let him come home late and come a broken man—all shipsmates lost, alone in a stranger's ship—and let him find a world of pain at home!'

So he prayed and the god of the sea-blue mane, Poseidon, heard his prayer. The monster suddenly hoisted a boulder—far larger—wheeled and heaved it, putting his weight behind it, massive strength, and the boulder crashed close, landing just in the wake of our dark stern. Just failing to graze the rudder's bladed edge. A huge swell reared up as the rock went plunging under, yes, and the tidal breaker drove us out to our island's far shore where all my well-decked ships lay moored, clustered, waiting, and huddled round them, crewmen sat in anguish, waiting, chatting for our return. We beached our vessel hard ashore on the sand, we swung out in the frothing surf ourselves, and herding Cyclops' sheep from our deep holds we shared them round so no one, not on my account, would go deprived of his fair share of spoils. But the splendid ram—as we meted out the flocks my friends-in-arms made him my prize of honor. mine alone, and I slaughtered him on the beach and burnt his thighs to Cronus' mighty son, Zeus of the thundercloud who rules the world.

But my sacrifices failed to move the god:
Zeus was still obsessed with plans to destroy my entire oarsmen's fleet and loyal crew of comrades. Now all day long till the sun went down we sat and feasted on sides of meat and heady wine. Then when the sun had set and night came on we lay down and slept at the water's shelving edge. When young Dawn with her rose-red fingers shone once more I roused the men straightway, ordering all crews to man the ships and cast off cables quickly. They swung abroad at once, they sat to the oars in ranks and its rhythm churned the water white with stroke on stroke. And from there we sailed on, glad to escape our death yet sick at heart for the comrades we had lost.
The Odyssey

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