



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 winecups flowing. 10
 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 stands our seamark,
 Mount Neriton's leafy ridges shimmering 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 Aeaean 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 Ilium on to Ismarus,
 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.

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 hurtling 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 unyoking 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.

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, demonic 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 rags 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,
 eating 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 unscathed,
but just as I doubled Malea's cape, a tide-rip
and the North Wind drove me way off course
careering 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 fast
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,

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lawless brutes, who trust so to the everlasting gods
they never plant with their own hands or plow the soil.
Unsovn, unplowed, the earth teems with all they need,
wheat, barley and vines, swelled by the rains of Zeus
to yield a big full-bodied wine from clustered grapes.
They have no meeting place for council, no laws either,
no, up on the mountain peaks they live in arching caverns—
each a law to himself, ruling his wives and children,
not a care in the world for any neighbor.

Now,
a level island stretches flat across the harbor,
not close inshore to the Cyclops' coast, not too far out,
thick with woods where the wild goats breed by hundreds.
No trampling of men to start them from their lairs,
no hunters roughing it out on the woody ridges,
stalking quarry, ever raid their haven.
No flocks browse, no plowlands roll with wheat;
unplowed, unsovn forever—empty of humankind—
the island just feeds droves of bleating goats.
For the Cyclops have no ships with crimson prows,
no shipwrights there to build them good trim craft
that could sail them out to foreign ports of call
as most men risk the seas to trade with other men.
Such artisans would have made this island too
a decent place to live in . . . No mean spot,
it could bear you any crop you like in season.
The water-meadows along the low foaming shore
run soft and moist, and your vines would never flag.
The land's clear for plowing. Harvest on harvest,
a man could reap a healthy stand of grain—
the subsoil's dark and rich.
There's a snug deep-water harbor there, what's more,
no need for mooring-gear, no anchor-stones to heave,
no cables to make fast. Just beach your keels, ride out
the days till your shipmates' spirit stirs for open sea
and a fair wind blows. And last, at the harbor's head
there's a spring that rushes fresh from beneath a cave
and black poplars flourish round its mouth.

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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 moon 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.

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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 heady 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 Cicones' 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.

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I'll go across with my own ship and crew
 and probe the natives living over there.
 What *are* they—violent, savage, lawless?
 or friendly to strangers, god-fearing men?'

With that I boarded ship and told the crew
 to embark at once and cast off cables quickly.
 They swung aboard, they sat to the oars in ranks
 and in rhythm churned the water white with stroke on stroke.
 But as soon as we reached the coast I mentioned—no long trip—
 we spied a cavern just at the shore, gaping above the surf,
 towering, overgrown with laurel. And here big flocks,
 sheep and goats, were stalled to spend the nights,
 and around its mouth a yard was walled up
 with quarried boulders sunk deep in the earth
 and enormous pines and oak-trees looming darkly . . .
 Here was a giant's lair, in fact, who always pastured
 his sheepflocks far afield and never mixed with others.
 A grim loner, dead set in his own lawless ways.
 Here was a piece of work, by god, a monster
 built like no mortal who ever supped on bread,
 no, like a shaggy peak, I'd say—a man-mountain
 rearing head and shoulders over the world.

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Now then,

I told most of my good trusty crew to wait,
 to sit tight by the ship and guard her well
 while I picked out my dozen finest fighters
 and off I went. But I took a skin of wine along,
 the ruddy, irresistible wine that Maron gave me once,
 Euanthes' son, a priest of Apollo, lord of Ismarus,
 because we'd rescued him, his wife and children,
 reverent as we were;
 he lived, you see, in Apollo's holy grove.
 And so in return he gave me splendid gifts,
 he handed me seven bars of well-wrought gold,
 a mixing-bowl of solid silver, then this wine . . .
 He drew it off in generous wine-jars, twelve in all,
 all unmixed—and such a bouquet, a drink fit for the gods!

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No maid or man of his household knew that secret store,
 only himself, his loving wife and a single servant. 230
 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—
 no 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. 240

Our party quickly made its way to his cave
 but we failed to find our host himself inside;
 he was off in his pasture, ranging 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 250
 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 no lovely sight to my companions.

There we built a fire, set our hands on the cheeses, 260
 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-walled yard. 270
 Then to close his door he hoisted overhead
 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 bleating 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, 280
 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, over 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, 290
 'Men of Achaea we are and bound now from Troy!
 Driven far off course by the warring winds,
 over the vast gulf of 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 Atrides 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 300
 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 shield
of storm and thunder, or any other blessed god—
we've got more force by far. 310
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,
he drove it against the rocks at your island's far cape, 320
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 pups—
their brains gushed 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! 330
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

to steal up to him, draw the sharp sword at my hip
and stab his chest where the midriff packs the liver—
I groped for the fatal spot but a fresh thought held me back.
There at a stroke we'd finish off ourselves as well— 340
how could *we* with our bare hands heave back
that slab he set to block his cavern's gaping maw?
So we lay there groaning, waiting Dawn's first light.

When young Dawn with her rose-red fingers shone once more
the monster relit his fire and milked his handsome ewes,
each in order, putting a suckling underneath each dam,
and as soon as he'd briskly finished all his chores
he snatched up two more men and fixed his meal.
Well-fed, he drove his fat sheep from the cave,
lightly lifting the huge doorslab up and away, 350
then slipped it back in place
as a hunter flips the lid of his quiver shut.
Piercing whistles—turning his flocks to the hills
he left me there, the heart inside me brooding on revenge:
how could I pay him back? would Athena give me glory?
Here was the plan that struck my mind as best . . .
the Cyclops' great club: there it lay by the pens,
olivewood, full of sap. He'd lopped it off to brandish
once it dried. Looking it over, we judged it big enough
to be the mast of a pitch-black ship with her twenty oars, 360
a freighter broad in the beam that plows through miles of sea—
so long, so thick it bulked before our eyes. Well,
flanking it now, I chopped off a fathom's length,
rolled it to comrades, told them to plane it down,
and they made the club smooth as I bent and shaved
the tip to a stabbing point. I turned it over
the blazing fire to char it good and hard,
then hid it well, buried deep under the dung
that littered the cavern's floor in thick wet clumps.
And now I ordered my shipmates all to cast lots— 370
who'd brave it out with me
to hoist our stake and grind it into his eye
when sleep had overcome him? Luck of the draw:

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 sleek flock into the vaulted cavern,
rams 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 suckling 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,
brimful of my ruddy wine,
and went right up to the Cyclops, enticing,
'Here, Cyclops, try this wine—to top off
the banquet of human flesh you've bolted 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 outrages all that's right!'

At that he seized the bowl and tossed it off
and the heady 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 brimmed 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?

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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.'

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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 sleep that conquers all overwhelmed him now
as wine came spurting, 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:

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'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

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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 crackling 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!

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He loosed a hideous roar, the rock walls echoed round

and we scuttled back in terror. The monster wrenched the spike from his eye and out it came with a red geyser of blood—he flung it aside with frantic hands, and mad with pain he bellowed out for help from his neighbor Cyclops living round about in caves on windswept crags. Hearing his cries, they lumbered up from every side and hulking round his cavern, asked what ailed him: ‘What, Polyphemus, what in the world’s the trouble?’
 Roaring out in the godsent night to rob us of our sleep. . . . Surely no one’s rustling your flocks against your will—surely no one’s trying to kill you now by fraud or force!’

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‘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.’

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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 groaning, racked 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! But 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:

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I lashed them abreast, quietly, twisting the willow-twigs the Cyclops slept on—giant, lawless brute—I took them three by three; each ram in the middle bore 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 bellwether ram, the prize 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 steeled, enduring So we held on, desperate, waiting Dawn’s first light.

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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 halting before him here, but the idiot never sensed my men were trussed up under their thick fleecy ribs. And last of them all came my great ram now, striding out, weighed down with his dense 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 coward gouged 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 if only you thought like *me*, had words like *me* to tell me where that scoundrel is cringing from my rage! I’d smash him against the ground, I’d spill his brains—

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flooding 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 plump 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 wailed.
I cut it short, I stopped each shipmate’s cries,
my head tossing, brows frowning, silent signals
to hurry, tumble our fleecy 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 taunts:
‘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 went plunging under—
a tidal wave from the open sea. The sudden backwash
drove us landward again, forcing us close inshore
but grabbing a long pole, I thrust us off and away,
tossing my head for dear life, signaling crews
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

[458–92]

[493–523]

trying to check me, calm me, left and right:
‘So headstrong—why? Why rile 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, shamed 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, Eurymus’ 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 earthquake 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 no one will ever heal your eye,
not even your earthquake god himself!

But at that he bellowed out to lord Poseidon,
thrusting 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 shipmates 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, chafing 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.

590

600

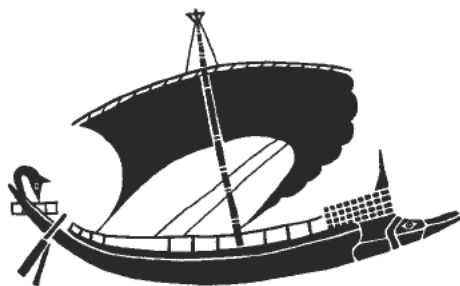
610

But my sacrifices failed to move the god:
Zeus was still obsessed with plans to destroy
my entire oarswept 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 aboard at once, they sat to the oars in ranks
and in 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."

620

630

PENGUIN BOOKS



H O M E R

The
Odyssey

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