

The wind that carried west from Ilium⁷
150 brought me to Ismarus, on the far shore,
a strongpoint on the coast of the Cicones.
I stormed that place and killed the men who fought.
Plunder we took, and we enslaved the women,
to make division, equal shares to all—
155 but on the spot I told them: ‘Back, and quickly!
Out to sea again!’ My men were mutinous,⁸
fools, on stores of wine. Sheep after sheep
they butchered by the surf, and shambling cattle,
feasting—while fugitives went inland, running
160 to call to arms the main force of Cicones.
This was an army, trained to fight on horseback
or, where the ground required, on foot. They came
with dawn over that terrain like the leaves
and blades of spring. So doom appeared to us,
165 dark word of Zeus for us, our evil days.
My men stood up and made a fight of it—
backed on the ships, with lances kept in play,
from bright morning through the blaze of noon
holding our beach, although so far outnumbered;
170 but when the sun passed toward unyoking time,
then the Achaeans,⁹ one by one, gave way.
Six benches were left empty in every ship
that evening when we pulled away from death.
And this new grief we bore with us to sea:
175 our precious lives we had, but not our friends.
No ship made sail next day until some shipmate
had raised a cry, three times, for each poor ghost
unfleshed by the Cicones on that field.

The Lotus-Eaters

Now Zeus the lord of cloud roused in the north
180 a storm against the ships, and driving veils
of squall moved down like night on land and sea.
The bows went plunging at the gust; sails
cracked and lashed out strips in the big wind.
We saw death in that fury, dropped the yards,
185 unshipped the oars, and pulled for the nearest lee:¹⁰
then two long days and nights we lay offshore
worn out and sick at heart, tasting our grief,

⁷ **Ilium:** Troy.

⁸ **Mutinous:** (adj.) rebellious.

⁹ **Achaeans:** Greeks; here, Odysseus’ men.

¹⁰ **Lee:** (n.) area sheltered from the wind.

until a third Dawn came with ringlets shining.
Then we put up our masts, hauled sail, and rested,
190 letting the steersmen and the breeze take over.

I might have made it safely home, that time,
but as I came round Malea the current
took me out to sea, and from the north
a fresh gale drove me on, past Cythera.
195 Nine days I drifted on the teeming sea
before dangerous high winds.”

“Upon the tenth
we came to the coastline of the Lotus Eaters,
who live upon that flower. We landed there
200 to take on water. All ships’ companies
mustered alongside for the midday meal.
Then I sent out two picked men and a runner
to learn what race of men that land sustained.
They fell in, soon enough, with Lotus Eaters,
205 who showed no will to do us harm, only
offering the sweet Lotus to our friends—
but those who ate this honeyed plant, the Lotus,
never cared to report, nor to return:
they longed to stay forever, browsing on
210 that native bloom, forgetful of their homeland.
I drove them, all three wailing, to the ships,
tied them down under their rowing benches,
and called the rest: ‘All hands aboard;
come, clear the beach and no one taste
215 the Lotus, or you lose your hope of home.’
Filing in to their places by the rowlocks
my oarsmen dipped their long oars in the surf,
and we moved out again on our seafaring.

The Cyclops

In the next land we found were Cyclopes,
giants, louts, without a law to bless them.
In ignorance leaving the fruitage of the earth
in mystery to the immortal gods, they neither plow
nor sow by hand, nor till the ground, though grain –
wild wheat and barley – grows untended, and
wine grapes, in clusters, ripen in heaven’s rains.
Cyclopes have no muster and no meeting,
no consultation or old tribal ways,

but each one dwells in his own mountain cave
dealing out rough justice to wife and child,
indifferent to what the others do. . .

“We lit a fire, burnt an offering,
220 and took some cheese to eat; then sat in silence
around the embers, waiting. When he came
he had a load of dry boughs on his shoulder
to stoke his fire at suppertime. He dumped it
with a great crash into that hollow cave,
225 and we all scattered fast to the far wall.
Then over the broad cavern floor he ushered
the ewes he meant to milk. He left his rams
and he-goats in the yard outside, and swung
high overhead a slab of solid rock
230 to close the cave. Two dozen four-wheeled wagons,
with heaving wagon teams, could not have stirred
the tonnage of that rock from where he wedged it
over the doorsill. Next he took his seat
and milked his bleating ewes. A practiced job
235 he made of it, giving each ewe her suckling;
thickened his milk, then, into curds and whey,
sieved out the curds to drip in withy baskets,
and poured the whey to stand in bowls
cooling until he drank it for his supper.
240 When all these chores were done, he poked the fire,
heaping on brushwood. In the glare he saw us.
‘Strangers,’ he said, ‘who are you? And where from?
What brings you here by seaways—a fair traffic?
Or are you wandering rogues, who cast your lives
245 like dice, and ravage other folk by sea?’
We felt a pressure on our hearts, in dread
of that deep rumble and that mighty man.
But all the same I spoke up in reply:
‘We are from Troy, Achaeans, blown off course
250 by shifting gales on the Great South Sea;
homeward bound, but taking routes and ways
uncommon; so the will of Zeus would have it.
We served under Agamemnon, son of Atreus—
the whole world knows what city
255 he laid waste, what armies he destroyed.
It was our luck to come here; here we stand,

beholden for your help, or any gifts
you give—as custom is to honor strangers.
We would entreat you, great Sir, have a care
260 for the gods' courtesy; Zeus will avenge
the unoffending guest.'

He answered this
from his brute chest, unmoved:

'You are a ninny,
or else you come from the other end of nowhere,
telling me, mind the gods! We Cyclopes
265 care not a whistle for your thundering Zeus
or all the gods in bliss; we have more force by far.
I would not let you go for fear of Zeus—
you or your friends—unless I had a whim to.
Tell me, where was it, now, you left your ship—
270 around the point, or down the shore, I wonder?'
He thought he'd find out, but I saw through this,
and answered with a ready lie:

'My ship?
Poseidon Lord, who sets the earth atremble,
broke it up on the rocks at your land's end.
275 A wind from seaward served him, drove us there.
We are survivors, these good men and I.'

Neither reply nor pity came from him,
but in one stride he clutched at my companions
and caught two in his hands like squirming puppies
280 to beat their brains out, spattering the floor.
Then he dismembered them and made his meal,
gaping and crunching like a mountain lion—
everything: innards, flesh, and marrow bones.

We cried aloud, lifting our hands to Zeus,
285 powerless, looking on at this, appalled;
but Cyclops went on filling up his belly
with manflesh and great gulps of whey,
then lay down like a mast among his sheep.

My heart beat high now at the chance of action,
290 and drawing the sharp sword from my hip I went
along his flank to stab him where the midriff
holds the liver. I had touched the spot
when sudden fear stayed me: if I killed him
we perished there as well, for we could never
295 move his ponderous doorway slab aside.

So we were left to groan and wait for morning.

(The Wandering page 2)

The Odyssey, Part One, continued

When the young Dawn with fingertips of rose
lit up the world, the Cyclops built a fire
and milked his handsome ewes, all in due order,
300 putting the sucklings to the mothers. Then,
his chores being all dispatched, he caught
another brace of men to make his breakfast,
and whisked away his great door slab
to let his sheep go through—but he, behind,
305 reset the stone as one would cap a quiver.
There was a din of whistling as the Cyclops
rounded his flock to higher ground, then stillness.
And now I pondered how to hurt him worst,
if but Athena granted what I prayed for.
310 Here are the means I thought would serve my turn:
a club, or staff, lay there along the fold—
an olive tree, felled green and left to season
for Cyclops's hand. And it was like a mast
a lugger of twenty oars, broad in the beam—
315 a deep-seagoing craft—might carry:
so long, so big around, it seemed. Now I
chopped out a six-foot section of this pole
and set it down before my men, who scraped it;
and when they had it smooth, I hewed again
320 to make a stake with pointed end. I held this
in the fire's heart and turned it, toughening it,
then hid it, well back in the cavern, under
one of the dung piles in profusion there.
Now came the time to toss for it: who ventured
325 along with me? Whose hand could bear to thrust
and grind that spike in Cyclops's eye, when mild
sleep had mastered him? As luck would have it,
the men I would have chosen won the toss—
four strong men, and I made five as captain.
330 At evening came the shepherd with his flock,
his woolly flock. The rams as well, this time,
entered the cave: by some shepherding whim—
or a god's bidding—none were left outside.
He hefted his great boulder into place
335 and sat him down to milk the bleating ewes
in proper order, put the lambs to suck,
and swiftly ran through all his evening chores.
Then he caught two more men and feasted on them.
My moment was at hand, and I went forward
40 holding an ivy bowl of my dark drink,

looking up, saying:

‘Cyclops, try some wine.

Here’s liquor to wash down your scraps of men.

Taste it, and see the kind of drink we carried
under our planks. I meant it for an offering

345 if you would help us home. But you are mad,
unbearable, a bloody monster! After this,
will any other traveler come to see you?’

He seized and drained the bowl, and it went down
so fiery and smooth he called for more:

350 ‘Give me another, thank you kindly. Tell me,
how are you called? I’ll make a gift will please you.
Even Cyclopes know the wine grapes grow
out of grassland and loam in heaven’s rain,
but here’s a bit of nectar and ambrosia!’

355 Three bowls I brought him, and he poured them down.
I saw the fuddle and flush come over him,
then I sang out in cordial tones:

‘Cyclops,

you ask my honorable name? Remember
the gift you promised me, and I shall tell you.

360 My name is Nohbdy: mother, father, and friends,

everyone calls me Nohbdy.’

And he said:

‘Nohbdy’s my meat, then, after I eat his friends.

Others come first. There’s a noble gift, now.’

Even as he spoke, he reeled and tumbled backward,

365 his great head lolling to one side; and sleep
took him like any creature. Drunk, hiccuping,
he dribbled streams of liquor and bits of men.
Now, by the gods, I drove my big hand spike
deep in the embers, charring it again,

370 and cheered my men along with battle talk
to keep their courage up: no quitting now.
The pike of olive, green though it had been,
reddened and glowed as if about to catch.

I drew it from the coals and my four fellows

375 gave me a hand, lugging it near the Cyclops
as more than natural force nerved them; straight
forward they sprinted, lifted it, and rammed it
deep in his crater eye, and I leaned on it
turning it as a shipwright turns a drill

380 in planking, having men below to swing
the two-handled strap that spins it in the groove.
So with our brand we bored that great eye socket

cords of willow from the ogre's bed;
425 then slung a man under each middle one
to ride there safely, shielded left and right.
So three sheep could convey each man. I took
the woolliest ram, the choicest of the flock,
and hung myself under his kinky belly,
430 pulled up tight, with fingers twisted deep
in sheepskin ringlets for an iron grip.
So, breathing hard, we waited until morning.
When Dawn spread out her fingertips of rose
the rams began to stir, moving for pasture,
435 and peals of bleating echoed round the pens
where dams with udders full called for a milking.
Blinded, and sick with pain from his head wound,
the master stroked each ram, then let it pass,
but my men riding on the pectoral fleece
440 the giant's blind hands blundering never found.
Last of them all my ram, the leader, came,
weighted by wool and me with my meditations.
The Cyclops patted him, and then he said:
'Sweet cousin ram, why lag behind the rest
445 in the night cave? You never linger so,
but graze before them all, and go afar
to crop sweet grass, and take your stately way
leading along the streams, until at evening
you run to be the first one in the fold.
450 Why, now, so far behind? Can you be grieving
over your Master's eye? That carrion rogue
and his accurst companions burnt it out
when he had conquered all my wits with wine.
Nohbdy will not get out alive, I swear.
455 Oh, had you brain and voice to tell
where he may be now, dodging all my fury!
Bashed by this hand and bashed on this rock wall
his brains would strew the floor, and I should have
rest from the outrage Nohbdy worked upon me.'

(The Wandering page 3)

460 He sent us into the open, then. Close by,
I dropped and rolled clear of the ram's belly,
going this way and that to untie the men.
With many glances back, we rounded up
his fat, stiff-legged sheep to take aboard,
465 and drove them down to where the good ship lay.
We saw, as we came near, our fellows' faces
shining; then we saw them turn to grief
tallying those who had not fled from death.

and these things he foretold for time to come:
my great eye lost, and at Odysseus' hands.
Always I had in mind some giant, armed
in giant force, would come against me here.

515 But this, but you—small, pitiful, and twiggy—
you put me down with wine, you blinded me.
Come back, Odysseus, and I'll treat you well,
praying the god of earthquake to befriend you—
his son I am, for he by his avowal

520 fathered me, and, if he will, he may
heal me of this black wound—he and no other
of all the happy gods or mortal men.'
Few words I shouted in reply to him:
'If I could take your life I would and take

525 your time away, and hurl you down to hell!
The god of earthquake could not heal you there!
'At this he stretched his hands out in his darkness
toward the sky of stars, and prayed Poseidon:

'O hear me, lord, blue girdler of the islands,
530 if I am thine indeed, and thou art father:
grant that Odysseus, raider of cities, never
see his home: Laertes' son, I mean,
who kept his hall on Ithaca. Should destiny
intend that he shall see his roof again

535 among his family in his fatherland,
far be that day, and dark the years between.
Let him lose all companions, and return
under strange sail to bitter days at home.' . . ."

(from Book 9)

THE WITCH CIRCE

"In the wild wood they found an open glade,
540 around a smooth stone house—the hall of Circe—
and wolves and mountain lions lay there, mild
in her soft spell, fed on her drug of evil.
None would attack—oh, it was strange, I tell you—
but switching their long tails they faced our men

545 like hounds, who look up when their master comes
with tidbits for them—as he will—from table.
Humbly those wolves and lions with mighty paws
fawned on our men—who met their yellow eyes
and feared them.

In the entranceway they stayed

635 under strange sail shall you come home, to find
your own house filled with trouble: insolent men
eating your livestock as they court your lady.
Aye, you shall make those men atone in blood!
But after you have dealt out death—in open
640 combat or by stealth—to all the suitors,
go overland on foot, and take an oar,
until one day you come where men have lived
with meat unsalted, never known the sea,
nor seen seagoing ships, with crimson bows
645 and oars that fledge light hulls for dipping flight.
The spot will soon be plain to you, and I
can tell you how: some passerby will say,
“What winnowing fan is that upon your shoulder?”
Halt, and implant your smooth oar in the turf
650 and make fair sacrifice to Lord Poseidon:
a ram, a bull, a great buck boar; turn back,
and carry out pure hecatombs at home
to all wide heaven’s lords, the undying gods,
to each in order. Then a seaborne death
655 soft as this hand of mist will come upon you
when you are wearied out with rich old age,
your countryfolk in blessed peace around you.
And all this shall be just as I foretell.’ . . .”
(from Book 11)

THE SIRENS; SCYLLA AND CHARYBDIS

“Listen with care
660 to this, now, and a god will arm your mind.
Square in your ship’s path are Sirens, crying
beauty to bewitch men coasting by;
woe to the innocent who hears that sound!
He will not see his lady nor his children
665 in joy, crowding about him, home from sea;
the Sirens will sing his mind away
on their sweet meadow lolling. There are bones
of dead men rotting in a pile beside them
and flayed skins shrivel around the spot.
Steer wide;
670 keep well to seaward; plug your oarsmen’s ears
with beeswax kneaded soft; none of the rest
should hear that song.
But if you wish to listen,
let the men tie you in the lugger, hand

‘Dear friends,
more than one man, or two, should know those things

720 Circe foresaw for us and shared with me,
so let me tell her forecast: then we die
with our eyes open, if we are going to die,
or know what death we baffle if we can. Sirens
weaving a haunting song over the sea

725 we are to shun, she said, and their green shore
all sweet with clover; yet she urged that I
alone should listen to their song. Therefore
you are to tie me up, tight as a splint,
erect along the mast, lashed to the mast,

730 and if I shout and beg to be untied,
take more turns of the rope to muffle me.’
I rather dwelt on this part of the forecast,
while our good ship made time, bound outward down
the wind for the strange island of Sirens.

735 Then all at once the wind fell, and a calm
came over all the sea, as though some power
lulled the swell.

The crew were on their feet
briskly, to furl the sail, and stow it; then,
each in place, they poised the smooth oar blades

740 and sent the white foam scudding by. I carved
a massive cake of beeswax into bits
and rolled them in my hands until they softened—
no long task, for a burning heat came down
from Helios, lord of high noon. Going forward

745 I carried wax along the line, and laid it
thick on their ears. They tied me up, then, plumb
amidships, back to the mast, lashed to the mast,
and took themselves again to rowing. Soon,
as we came smartly within hailing distance,

750 the two Sirens, noting our fast ship
off their point, made ready, and they sang. . . .
The lovely voices in ardor appealing over the water
made me crave to listen, and I tried to say
‘Untie me!’ to the crew, jerking my brows;

755 but they bent steady to the oars. Then Perimedes
got to his feet, he and Eurylochus,
and passed more line about, to hold me still.
So all rowed on, until the Sirens
dropped under the sea rim, and their singing
dwindled away.

(The Wandering page 5)

The Odyssey, Part One, continued

800 upon that cliffside veiled in cloud, but nowhere
could I catch sight of her.

And all this time,
in travail, sobbing, gaining on the current,
we rowed into the strait—Scylla to port
and on our starboard beam Charybdis, dire
805 gorge of the salt sea tide. By heaven! when she
vomited, all the sea was like a caldron
seething over intense fire, when the mixture
suddenly heaves and rises.

The shot spume
soared to the landside heights, and fell like rain.
810 But when she swallowed the sea water down
we saw the funnel of the maelstrom, heard
the rock bellowing all around, and dark
sand raged on the bottom far below.
My men all blanched against the gloom, our eyes
815 were fixed upon that yawning mouth in fear
of being devoured.

Then Scylla made her strike,
whisking six of my best men from the ship.
I happened to glance aft at ship and oarsmen
and caught sight of their arms and legs, dangling
820 high overhead. Voices came down to me
in anguish, calling my name for the last time.
A man surf-casting on a point of rock
for bass or mackerel, whipping his long rod
to drop the sinker and the bait far out,
825 will hook a fish and rip it from the surface
to dangle wriggling through the air;
so these
were borne aloft in spasms toward the cliff.

She ate them as they shrieked there, in her den,
in the dire grapple, reaching still for me—
830 and deathly pity ran me through
at that sight—far the worst I ever suffered
questing the passes of the strange sea.

We rowed on.
The Rocks were now behind; Charybdis, too,
and Scylla dropped astern.

THE CATTLE OF THE SUN GOD

In the small hours of the third watch, when stars
845 that shone out in the first dusk of evening

had gone down to their setting, a giant wind
blew from heaven, and clouds driven by Zeus
shrouded land and sea in a night of storm;
so, just as Dawn with fingertips of rose
850 touched the windy world, we dragged our ship
to cover in a grotto, a sea cave
where nymphs had chairs of rock and sanded floors.
I mustered all the crew and said:

‘Old shipmates,
our stores are in the ship’s hold, food and drink;
855 the cattle here are not for our provision,
or we pay dearly for it.

Fierce the god is
who cherishes these heifers and these sheep:
Helios; and no man avoids his eye.’

To this my fighters nodded. Yes. But now
860 we had a month of onshore gales, blowing
day in, day out—south winds, or south by east.
As long as bread and good red wine remained
to keep the men up, and appease their craving,
they would not touch the cattle. But in the end,
865 when all the barley in the ship was gone,
hunger drove them to scour the wild shore
with angling hooks, for fishes and sea fowl,
whatever fell into their hands; and lean days
wore their bellies thin.

The storms continued.
870 So one day I withdrew to the interior
to pray the gods in solitude, for hope
that one might show me some way of salvation.
Slipping away, I struck across the island
to a sheltered spot, out of the driving gale.
875 I washed my hands there, and made supplication
to the gods who own Olympus, all the gods—
but they, for answer, only closed my eyes
under slow drops of sleep.

Now on the shore Eurylochus
made his insidious plea:

‘Comrades,’ he said,
880 ‘You’ve gone through everything; listen to what I say.
All deaths are hateful to us, mortal wretches,
but famine is the most pitiful, the worst
end that a man can come to.

Will you fight it?
Come, we’ll cut out the noblest of these cattle
885 for sacrifice to the gods who own the sky;

and once at home, in the old country of Ithaca,
if ever that day comes—

we'll build a costly temple and adorn it
with every beauty for the Lord of Noon.

890 But if he flares up over his heifers lost,
wishing our ship destroyed, and if the gods
make cause with him, why, then I say: Better
open your lungs to a big sea once for all
than waste to skin and bones on a lonely island!

895 Thus Eurylochus; and they murmured 'Aye!'
trooping away at once to round up heifers.
Now, that day tranquil cattle with broad brows
were grazing near, and soon the men drew up
around their chosen beasts in ceremony.

900 They plucked the leaves that shone on a tall oak—
having no barley meal—to strew the victims,
performed the prayers and ritual, knifed the kine
and flayed each carcass, cutting thighbones free
to wrap in double folds of fat. These offerings,

905 with strips of meat, were laid upon the fire.
Then, as they had no wine, they made libation
with clear spring water, broiling the entrails first;
and when the bones were burnt and tripes shared,
they spitted the carved meat.

Just then my slumber

910 left me in a rush, my eyes opened,
and I went down the seaward path. No sooner
had I caught sight of our black hull, than savory
odors of burnt fat eddied around me;
grief took hold of me, and I cried aloud:

915 'O Father Zeus and gods in bliss forever,
you made me sleep away this day of mischief!
O cruel drowsing, in the evil hour!
Here they sat, and a great work they contrived.'

Lampetia in her long gown meanwhile

920h had borne swift word to the Overlord of Noon:
'They have killed your kine.'

And the Lord Helios

burst into angry speech amid the immortals:

'O Father Zeus and gods in bliss forever,
punish Odysseus' men! So overweening,

925 now they have killed my peaceful kine, my joy
at morning when I climbed the sky of stars,
and evening, when I bore westward from heaven.
Restitution or penalty they shall pay—

and pay in full—or I go down forever
930 to light the dead men in the underworld.’ . . .”
(*from* Book 12)