



The Shield of Achilles

So the men fought on like a mass of whirling fire as swift Antilochus raced the message toward Achilles. Sheltered under his curving, beaked ships he found his foreboding, deep down, all that had come to pass. Agonizing now he probed his own great heart: "Why, why? Our long-haired Achæans routed again, driven in terror off the plain to crowd the ships, but why? Dear gods, don't bring to pass the grief that haunts my heart—the prophecy that mother revealed to me one time . . . she said the best of the Myrmidons—while I lived—would fall at Trojan hands and leave the light of day. And now he's dead, I know it. Menoetius' gallant son, my headstrong friend! And I told Patroclus clearly, 'Once you have beaten off the lethal fire, quick, come back to the ships—you must not battle Hector!'"

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As such fears went churning through his mind
 the warlord Nestor's son drew near him now,
 streaming warm tears, to give the dreaded message:
 "Ah son of royal Peleus, what you must hear from me!
 What painful news—would to god it had never happened!
 Patroclus has fallen. They're fighting over his corpse.
 He's stripped, naked—Hector with that flashing helmet,
 Hector has your arms!"

So the captain reported.

A black cloud of grief came shrouding over Achilles.
 Both hands clawing the ground for soot and filth,
 he poured it over his head, fouled his handsome face
 and black ashes settled onto his fresh clean war-shirt.
 Overpowered in all his power, sprawled in the dust,
 Achilles lay there, fallen . . .
 tearing his hair, defiling it with his own hands.
 And the women he and Patroclus carried off as captives
 caught the grief in their hearts and keened and wailed,
 out of the tents they ran to ring the great Achilles,
 all of them beat their breasts with clenched fists,
 sank to the ground, each woman's knees gave way.
 Antilochus kneeling near, weeping uncontrollably,
 clutched Achilles' hands as he wept his proud heart out—
 for fear he would slash his throat with an iron blade.
 Achilles suddenly loosed a terrible, wrenching cry
 and his noble mother heard him, seated near her father,
 the Old Man of the Sea in the salt green depths,
 and she cried out in turn. And immortal sea-nymphs
 gathered round their sister, all the Nereids dwelling
 down the sounding depths, they all came rushing now—
 Glitter, blossoming Spray and the swells' Embrace,
 Fair-Isle and shadowy Cavern, Mist and Spindrift,
 ocean nymphs of the glances pooling deep and dark,
 Race-with-the-Waves and Headlands' Hope and Safe Haven,
 Glimmer of Honey, Suave-and-Soothing, Whirlpool, Brilliance,
 Bounty and First Light and Speeder of Ships and buoyant Powe:
 Welcome Home and Bather of Meadows and Master's Lovely
 Consort,

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Gift of the Sea, Eyes of the World and the famous milk-white Calm
 and Truth and Never-Wrong and the queen who rules the tides
 in beauty
 and in rushed Glory and Healer of Men and the one who rescues
 kings
 and Sparkler, Down-from-the-Cliffs, sleek-haired Strands of Sand
 and all the rest of the Nereids dwelling down the depths.
 The silver cave was shimmering full of sea-nymphs,
 all in one mounting chorus beating their breasts
 as Thetis launched the dirge: "Hear me, sisters,
 daughters of Nereus, so you all will know it well—
 listen to all the sorrows welling in my heart!
 I am agony—

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mother of grief and greatness—O my child!

Yes, I gave birth to a flawless, mighty son . . .
 the splendor of heroes, and he shot up like a young branch,
 like a fine tree I reared him—the orchard's crowning glory—
 but only to send him off in the beaked ships to Troy
 to battle Trojans! Never again will I embrace him
 striding home through the doors of Peleus' house.
 And long as I have him with me, still alive,
 looking into the sunlight, he is racked with anguish.
 And I, I go to his side—nothing I do can help him.
 Nothing. But go I shall, to see my darling boy,
 to hear what grief has come to break his heart
 while he holds back from battle."

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So Thetis cried

as she left the cave and her sisters swam up with her,
 all in a tide of tears, and billowing round them now
 the ground swell heaved open. And once they reached
 the fertile land of Troy they all streamed ashore,
 row on row in a long cortege, the sea-nymphs
 filing up where the Myrmidon ships lay hauled,
 clustered closely round the great runner Achilles . . .
 As he groaned from the depths his mother rose before him
 and sobbing a sharp cry, cradled her son's head in her hands
 and her words were all compassion, winging pity: "My child—
 why in tears? What sorrow has touched your heart?"

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Tell me, please. Don't harbor it deep inside you.
Zeus has accomplished everything you wanted,
just as you raised your hands and prayed that day.
All the sons of Achaea are pinned against the ships
and all for want of you—they suffer shattering losses.”

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And groaning deeply the matchless runner answered,
“O dear mother, true! All those burning desires
Olympian Zeus has brought to pass for me—
but what joy to me now? My dear comrade's dead—
Patroclus—the man I loved beyond all other comrades,
loved as my own life—I've lost him—Hector's killed him,
stripped the gigantic armor off his back, a marvel to behold—
my burnished gear! Radiant gifts the gods presented Peleus
that day they drove you into a mortal's marriage bed . . .
I wish you'd lingered deep with the deathless sea-nymphs,
lived at ease, and Peleus carried home a mortal bride.
But now, as it is, sorrows, unending sorrows must surge
within your heart as well—for your own son's death.
Never again will you embrace him striding home.
My spirit rebels—I've lost the will to live,
to take my stand in the world of men—unless,
before all else, Hector's battered down by my spear
and gasps away his life, the blood-price for Patroclus,
Menoetius' gallant son he's killed and stripped!”

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But Thetis answered, warning through her tears,
“You're doomed to a short life, my son, from all you say!
For hard on the heels of Hector's death your death
must come at once—”

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“Then let me die at once”—
Achilles burst out, despairing—“since it was not my fate
to save my dearest comrade from his death! Look,
a world away from his fatherland he's perished,
lacking me, my fighting strength, to defend him.
But now, since I shall not return to my fatherland . . .
nor did I bring one ray of hope to my Patroclus,
nor to the rest of all my steadfast comrades,

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countless ranks struck down by mighty Hector—
No, no, here I sit by the ships . . .
a useless, dead weight on the good green earth—
I, no man my equal among the bronze-armed Achaeans,
not in battle, only in wars of words that others win.
If only strife could die from the lives of gods and men
and anger that drives the sanest man to flare in outrage—
bitter gall, sweeter than dripping streams of honey,
that swarms in people's chests and blinds like smoke—
just like the anger Agamemnon king of men
has roused within me now . . .

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Enough.

Let bygones be bygones. Done is done.
Despite my anguish I will beat it down,
the fury mounting inside me, down by force.
But now I'll go and meet that murderer head-on
that Hector who destroyed the dearest life I know
For my own death, I'll meet it freely—whenever Zeus
and the other deathless gods would like to bring it on!
Not even Heracles fled his death, for all his power,
favorite son as he was to Father Zeus the King.
Fate crushed him, and Hera's savage anger.
And I too, if the same fate waits for me . . .
I'll lie in peace, once I've gone down to death.
But now, for the moment, let me seize great glory!—
and drive some woman of Troy or deep-breasted Dardan
to claw with both hands at her tender cheeks and wipe away
her burning tears as the sobs come choking from her throat—
they'll learn that I refrained from war a good long time!
Don't try to hold me back from the fighting, mother,
love me as you do. You can't persuade me now.”

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The goddess of the glistening feet replied,
“Yes, my son, you're right. No coward's work,
to save your exhausted friends from headlong death.
But your own handsome war-gear lies in Trojan hands,
bronze and burnished—and Hector in that flashing helmet,
Hector glories in your armor, strapped across his back.

Not that he will glory in it long, I tell you:
 his own destruction hovers near him now. Wait—
 don't fling yourself in the grind of battle yet,
 not till you see me coming back with your own eyes. 160
 Tomorrow I will return to you with the rising sun,
 bearing splendid arms from Hephaestus, god of fire!"

With that vow she turned away from her son
 and faced and urged her sisters of the deep,
 "Now down you go in the Ocean's folding gulfs
 to visit father's halls—the Old Man of the Sea—
 and tell him all. I am on my way to Olympus heights,
 to the famous Smith Hephaestus—I pray he'll give my son
 some fabulous armor full of the god's great fire!"

And under a foaming wave her sisters dove 170
 as glistening-footed Thetis soared toward Olympus
 to win her dear son an immortal set of arms.

And now,

as her feet swept her toward Olympus, ranks of Achaeans,
 fleeing man-killing Hector with grim, unearthly cries,
 reached the ships and the Hellespont's long shore.
 As for Patroclus, there seemed no hope that Achaeans
 could drag the corpse of Achilles' comrade out of range.
 Again the Trojan troops and teams overtook the body
 with Hector son of Priam storming fierce as fire.
 Three times illustrious Hector shouted for support, 180
 seized his feet from behind, wild to drag him off,
 three times the Aeantes, armored in battle-fury
 fought him off the corpse. But Hector held firm,
 staking all on his massive fighting strength—
 again and again he'd hurl himself at the melee,
 again and again stand fast with piercing cries
 but he never gave ground backward, not one inch.
 The helmed Aeantes could no more frighten Hector,
 the proud son of Priam, back from Patroclus' corpse
 than shepherds out in the field can scare a tawny lion 190
 off his kill when the hunger drives the beast claw-mad.

And now Hector would have hauled the body away
 and won undying glory . . .
 if wind-swift Iris had not swept from Olympus
 bearing her message—Peleus' son must arm—
 but all unknown to Zeus and the other gods
 since Hera spurred her on. Halting near
 she gave Achilles a flight of marching orders:
 "To arms—son of Peleus! Most terrifying man alive!
 Defend Patroclus! It's all for him, this merciless battle 200
 pitched before the ships. They're mauling each other now,
 Achaeans struggling to save the corpse from harm,
 Trojans charging to haul it back to windy Troy.
 Flashing Hector far in the lead, wild to drag it off,
 furious to lop the head from its soft, tender neck
 and stake it high on the city's palisade.

Up with you—
 no more lying low! Writhe with shame at the thought
 Patroclus may be sport for the dogs of Troy!
 Yours, the shame will be yours
 if your comrade's corpse goes down to the dead defiled!" 210

But the swift runner replied, "Immortal Iris—
 what god has sped you here to tell me this?"

Quick as the wind the rushing Iris answered,
 "Hera winged me on, the illustrious wife of Zeus.
 But the son of Cronus throned on high knows nothing,
 nor does any other immortal housed on Olympus
 shrouded deep in snow."

Achilles broke in quickly—
 "How can I go to war? The Trojans have my gear.
 And my dear mother told me I must not arm for battle,
 not till I see her coming back with my own eyes— 220
 she vowed to bring me burnished arms from the god of fire.
 I know of no other armor. Whose gear could I wear?
 None but Telamonian Ajax' giant shield.
 But he's at the front, I'm sure, engaging Trojans,
 slashing his spear to save Patroclus' body."

Quick as the wind the goddess had a plan:
 "We know—we too—they hold your famous armor.
 Still, just as you are, go out to the broad trench
 and show yourself to the Trojans. Struck with fear
 at the sight of you, they might hold off from attack
 and Achaea's fighting sons get second wind,
 exhausted as they are . . .
 Breathing room in war is all too brief."

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And Iris racing the wind went veering off
 as Achilles, Zeus's favorite fighter, rose up now
 and over his powerful shoulder Pallas slung the shield,
 the tremendous storm-shield with all its tassels flaring—
 and crowning his head the goddess swept a golden cloud
 and from it she lit a fire to blaze across the field.
 As smoke goes towering up the sky from out a town
 cut off on a distant island under siege . . .
 enemies battling round it, defenders all day long
 trading desperate blows from their own city walls
 but soon as the sun goes down the signal fires flash,
 rows of beacons blazing into the air to alert their neighbors—
 if only they'll come in ships to save them from disaster—
 so now from Achilles' head the blaze shot up the sky.
 He strode from the rampart, took his stand at the trench
 but he would not mix with the milling Argive ranks.
 He stood in awe of his mother's strict command.
 So there he rose and loosed an enormous cry
 and off in the distance Pallas shrieked out too
 and drove unearthly panic through the Trojans.
 Piercing loud as the trumpet's battle cry that blasts
 from murderous raiding armies ringed around some city—
 so piercing now the cry that broke from Aeacides.
 And Trojans hearing the brazen voice of Aeacides,
 all their spirits quaked—even sleek-maned horses,
 sensing death in the wind, slewed their chariots round
 and charioteers were struck dumb when they saw that fire,
 relentless, terrible, burst from proud-hearted Achilles' head,
 blazing as fiery-eyed Athena fueled the flames. Three times

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the brilliant Achilles gave his great war cry over the trench,
 three times the Trojans and famous allies whirled in panic—
 and twelve of their finest fighters died then and there,
 crushed by chariots, impaled on their own spears.
 And now the exultant Argives seized the chance
 to drag Patroclus' body quickly out of range
 and laid him on a litter . . .
 Standing round him, loving comrades mourned,
 and the swift runner Achilles joined them, grieving,
 weeping warm tears when he saw his steadfast comrade
 lying dead on the bier, mauled by tearing bronze,
 the man he sent to war with team and chariot
 but never welcomed home again alive.

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Now Hera the ox-eyed queen of heaven drove the sun,
 untired and all unwilling, to sink in the Ocean's depths
 and the sun went down at last and brave Achaeans ceased
 the grueling clash of arms, the leveling rout of war.

And the Trojans in turn, far across the field,
 pulling forces back from the last rough assault,
 freed their racing teams from under chariot yokes
 but before they thought of supper, grouped for council
 They met on their feet. Not one of them dared to sit
 for terror seized them all—the great Achilles
 who held back from the brutal fighting so long
 had just come blazing forth.
 Panthous' son Polydamas led the debate,
 a good clear head, and the only man who saw
 what lay in the past and what the Trojans faced.
 He was Hector's close comrade, born on the same night,
 but excelled at trading words as he at trading spear-thrusts.
 And now, with all good will, Polydamas rose and spoke:
 "Weigh both sides of the crisis well, my friends.
 What I urge is this: draw back to the city now.
 Don't wait for the holy Dawn to find us here afield,
 ranged by the ships—we're too far from our walls.
 As long as that man kept raging at royal Agamemnon

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the Argive troops were easier game to battle down.
 I too was glad to camp the night on the shipways,
 hopes soaring to seize their heavy rolling hulls. 300
 But now racing Achilles makes my blood run cold.
 So wild the man's fury he will never rest content,
 holding out on the plain where Trojans and Argives
 met halfway, exchanging blows in the savage onset—
 never: *he* will fight for our wives, for Troy itself!
 So retreat to Troy. Trust me—we will face disaster.
 Now, for the moment, the bracing godsent night
 has stopped the swift Achilles in his tracks.
 But let him catch us lingering here tomorrow, 310
 just as he rises up in arms—there may be some
 who will sense his fighting spirit all too well.
 You'll thank your stars to get back to sacred Troy,
 whoever escapes him. Dogs and birds will have their fill—
 of Trojan flesh, by heaven. Battalions of Trojans!
 Pray god such grief will never reach my ears.
 So follow my advice, hard as it may seem . . .
 Tonight conserve our strength in the meeting place,
 and the great walls and gates and timbered doors we hung,
 well-planed, massive and bolted tight, will shield the city. 320
 But tomorrow at daybreak, armed to the hilt for battle,
 we man the towering ramparts. All the worse for him—
 if Achilles wants to venture forth from the fleet,
 fight us round our walls. Back to the ships he'll go,
 once he's lashed the power out of his rippling stallions,
 whipping them back and forth beneath our city walls.
 Not even *his* fury will let him crash our gates—
 he'll never plunder Troy.
 Sooner the racing dogs will eat him raw!"

Helmet flashing, Hector wheeled with a dark glance: 330
 "No more, Polydamas! Your pleading repels me now.
 You say go back again—be crammed inside the city.
 Aren't you sick of being caged inside those walls?
 Time was when the world would talk of Priam's Troy
 as the city rich in gold and rich in bronze—but now

our houses are stripped of all their sumptuous treasures,
 troves sold off and shipped to Phrygia, lovely Maeonia,
 once great Zeus grew angry . . .
 But now, the moment the son of crooked Cronus
 allows me to seize some glory here at the ships 340
 and pin these Argives back against the sea—
 you fool, enough! No more thoughts of retreat
 paraded before our people. Not that one Trojan
 will ever take your lead—I'll never permit it.
 Come, follow my orders! All obey me now.
 Take supper now. Take your posts through camp.
 And no forgetting the watch, each man wide awake.
 And any Trojan so weighed down, so oppressed
 by his own possessions, let him collect the lot,
 pass them round to the people—a grand public feast. 350
 Far better for one of ours to reap the benefits
 than all the marauding Argives. Then, as you say,
 'tomorrow at daybreak, armed to the hilt for battle'—
 we slash to attack against their deep curved hulls!
 If it really *was* Achilles who reared beside the ships,
 all the worse for him—if he wants his fill of war.
 I for one, I'll never run from his grim assault,
 I'll stand up to the man—see if he bears off glory
 or I bear it off myself! The god of war is impartial:
 he hands out death to the man who hands out death." 360

So Hector finished. The Trojans roared assent,
 lost in folly. Athena had swept away their senses.
 They gave applause to Hector's ruinous tactics,
 none to Polydamas, who gave them sound advice.
 And now their entire army settled down to supper
 but all night long the Argives raised Patroclus' dirge.
 And Achilles led them now in a throbbing chant of sorrow,
 laying his man-killing hands on his great friend's chest,
 convulsed with bursts of grief. Like a bearded lion
 whose pride of cubs a deer-hunter has snatched away, 370
 out of some thick woods, and back he comes, too late,
 and his heart breaks but he courses after the hunter,

hot on his tracks down glen on twisting glen—
 where can he find him?—gripped by piercing rage . . .
 so Achilles groaned, deeply, crying out to his Myrmidons,
 “O my captains! How empty the promise I let fall
 that day I reassured Menoetius in his house—
 I promised the king I’d bring him back his son,
 home to Opois, covered in glory, Troy sacked,
 hauling his rightful share of plunder home, home. 380
 But Zeus will never accomplish all our best-laid plans.
 Look at us. Both doomed to stain red with our blood
 the same plot of earth, a world away in Troy!
 For not even *I* will voyage home again. Never.
 No embrace in his halls from the old horseman Peleus
 nor from mother, Thetis—this alien earth I stride
 will hold me down at last.

But now, Patroclus,
 since I will follow you underneath the ground,
 I shall not bury you, no, not till I drag back here
 the gear and head of Hector, who slaughtered you, 390
 my friend, greathearted friend . . .
 Here in front of your flaming pyre I’ll cut the throats
 of a dozen sons of Troy in all their shining glory,
 venting my rage on them for your destruction!
 Till then you lie as you are beside my beaked ships
 and round you the Trojan women and deep-breasted Dardans
 will mourn you night and day, weeping burning tears,
 women we fought to win—strong hands and heavy lance—
 whenever we sacked rich cities held by mortal men.”

With that the brilliant Achilles ordered friends 400
 to set a large three-legged cauldron over the fire
 and wash the clotted blood from Patroclus’ wounds
 with all good speed. Hoisting over the blaze
 a cauldron filled to the brim with bathing water,
 they piled fresh logs beneath and lit them quickly.
 The fire lapped at the vessel’s belly, the water heated
 and soon as it reached the boil in the glowing bronze
 they bathed and anointed the body sleek with olive oil,

closed each wound with a soothing, seasoned unguent
 and then they laid Patroclus on his bier . . . 410
 covered him head to foot in a thin light sheet
 and over his body spread the white linen shroud.
 Then all night long, ringing the great runner Achilles,
 Myrmidon fighters mourned and raised Patroclus’ dirge.

But Zeus turned to Hera, his wife and sister, saying,
 “So, my ox-eyed Queen, you’ve had your way at last,
 setting the famous runner Achilles on his feet.
 Mother Hera—look, these long-haired Achaeans
 must be sprung of your own immortal loins.”

But her eyes widening, noble Hera answered, 420
 “Dread majesty, son of Cronus, what are you saying?
 Even a mortal man will act to help a friend,
 condemned as a mortal always is to death
 and hardly endowed with wisdom deep as ours.
 So how could I, claiming to be the highest goddess—
 both by birth and since I am called your consort
 and you in turn rule all the immortal gods—
 how could I hold back from these, these Trojans,
 men I loathe, and fail to weave their ruin?”

Now as the King and Queen provoked each other, 430
 glistening-footed Thetis reached Hephaestus’ house,
 indestructible, bright as stars, shining among the gods,
 built of bronze by the crippled Smith with his own hands.
 There she found him, sweating, wheeling round his bellows,
 pressing the work on twenty three-legged cauldrons,
 an array to ring the walls inside his mansion.
 He’d bolted golden wheels to the legs of each
 so all on their own speed, at a nod from him,
 they could roll to halls where the gods convene
 then roll right home again—a marvel to behold. 440
 But not quite finished yet . . .
 the god had still to attach the inlaid handles.

These he was just fitting, beating in the rivets.
 As he bent to the work with all his craft and cunning,
 Thetis on her glistening feet drew near the Smith.
 But Charis saw her first, Charis coming forward,
 lithe and lovely in all her glittering headdress,
 the Grace the illustrious crippled Smith had married.
 Approaching Thetis, she caught her hand and spoke her name:
 “Thetis of flowing robes! What brings you to our house?
 450
 A beloved, honored friend—but it’s been so long,
 your visits much too rare. Follow me in, please,
 let me offer you all a guest could want.”

Welcome words,

and the radiant goddess Charis led the way inside.
 She seated her on a handsome, well-wrought chair,
 studded with silver, under it slipped a stool
 and called the famous Smith: “Hephaestus, come—
 look who’s here! Thetis would ask a favor of you!”

And the famous crippled Smith exclaimed warmly,
 “Thetis—here? Ah then a wondrous, honored goddess
 460
 comes to grace our house! Thetis saved my life
 when the mortal pain came on me after my great fall,
thanks to my mother’s will, that brazen bitch,
she wanted to hide me—because I was a cripple.
 What shattering anguish I’d have suffered then,
 if Thetis had not taken me to her breast, Eurynome too,
 the daughter of Ocean’s stream that runs around the world.
Nine years I lived with both, forging bronze by the trove,
 elegant brooches, whorled pins, necklaces, chokers, chains—
 there in the vaulted cave—and round us Ocean’s currents
 470
 swirled in a foaming, roaring rush that never died.
 And no one knew. Not a single god or mortal,
only Thetis and Eurynome knew—they saved me.
 And here is Thetis now, in our own house!
 So I *must* do all I can to pay her back,
 the price for the life she saved . . .
 the nymph of the sea with sleek and lustrous locks.
 Quickly, set before her stranger’s generous fare

while I put away my bellows and all my tools.”

With that

he heaved up from the anvil block—his immense hulk
 480
 hobbling along but his shrunken legs moved nimbly.
 He swung the bellows aside and off the fires,
 gathered the tools he’d used to weld the cauldrons
 and packed them all in a sturdy silver strongbox.
 Then he sponged off his brow and both burly arms,
 his massive neck and shaggy chest, pulled on a shirt
 and grasping a heavy staff, Hephaestus left his forge
 and hobbled on. Handmaids ran to attend their master,
 all cast in gold but a match for living, breathing girls.
 Intelligence fills their hearts, voice and strength their frames,
 490
 from the deathless gods they’ve learned their works of hand.
 They rushed to support their lord as he went bustling on
 and lurching nearer to Thetis, took his polished seat,
 reached over to clutch her hand and spoke her name:
 “Thetis of flowing robes! What brings you to our house?
 A beloved, honored friend—but it’s been so long,
 your visits much too rare.
 Tell me what’s on your mind. I am eager to do it—
 whatever I *can* do . . . whatever can be done.”

But Thetis burst into tears, her voice welling:
 500
 “Oh Hephaestus—who of all the goddesses on Olympus,
 who has borne such withering sorrows in her heart?
 Such pain as Zeus has given me, above all others!
 Me out of all the daughters of the sea he chose
 to yoke to a mortal man, Peleus, son of Aeacus,
 and I endured his bed, a mortal’s bed, resisting
 with all my will. And now he lies in the halls,
 broken with grisly age, but now my griefs are worse.
 Remember? Zeus also gave me a son to bear and breed,
 the splendor of heroes, and he shot up like a young branch,
 510
 like a fine tree I reared him—the orchard’s crowning glory—
 but only to send him off in the beaked ships to Troy
 to battle Trojans! Never again will I embrace him
 striding home through the doors of Peleus’ house.

And long as I have him with me, still alive,
 looking into the sunlight, he is racked with anguish.
 I go to his side—nothing I do can help him. Nothing.
 That girl the sons of Achaea picked out for his prize—
 right from his grasp the mighty Agamemnon tore her,
 and grief for her has been gnawing at his heart. 520
 But then the Trojans pinned the Achaeans tight
 against their sterns, they gave them no way out,
 and the Argive warlords begged my son to help,
 they named in full the troves of glittering gifts
 they'd send his way. But at that point he refused
 to beat disaster off—refused himself, that is—
 but he buckled his own armor round Patroclus,
 sent him into battle with an army at his back.
 And all day long they fought at the Scaean Gates,
 that very day they would have stormed the city too, 530
 if Apollo had not killed Menoetius' gallant son
 as he laid the Trojans low—Apollo cut him down
 among the champions there and handed Hector glory.
 So now I come, I throw myself at your knees,
 please help me! Give my son—he won't live long—
 a shield and helmet and tooled greaves with ankle-straps
 and armor for his chest. All that he had was lost,
 lost when the Trojans killed his steadfast friend.
 Now he lies on the ground—his heart is breaking."

And the famous crippled Smith replied, "Courage! 540
 Anguish for all that armor—sweep it from your mind.
 If only I could hide him away from pain and death,
 that day his grim destiny comes to take Achilles,
 as surely as glorious armor shall be his, armor
 that any man in the world of men will marvel at
 through all the years to come—whoever sees its splendor."

With that he left her there and made for his bellows,
 turning them on the fire, commanding, "Work—to work!"
 And the bellows, all twenty, blew on the crucibles,
 breathing with all degrees of shooting, fiery heat 550

as the god hurried on—a blast for the heavy work,
 a quick breath for the light, all precisely gauged
 to the god of fire's wish and the pace of the work in hand.
 Bronze he flung in the blaze, tough, durable bronze
 and tin and priceless gold and silver, and then,
 planting the huge anvil upon its block, he gripped
 his mighty hammer in one hand, the other gripped his tongs.

And first Hephaestus makes a great and massive shield,
 blazing well-wrought emblems all across its surface,
 raising a rim around it, glittering, triple-ply 560
 with a silver shield-strap run from edge to edge
 and five layers of metal to build the shield itself,
 and across its vast expanse with all his craft and cunning
 the god creates a world of gorgeous immortal work.

There he made the earth and there the sky and the sea
 and the inexhaustible blazing sun and the moon rounding full
 and there the constellations, all that crown the heavens,
 the Pleiades and the Hyades, Orion in all his power too
 and the Great Bear that mankind also calls the Wagon:
 she wheels on her axis always fixed, watching Orion, 570
 and she alone is denied a plunge in the Ocean's baths.

And he forged on the shield two noble cities filled
 with mortal men. With weddings and wedding feasts in one
 and under glowing torches they brought forth the brides
 from the women's chambers, marching through the streets
 while choir on choir the wedding song rose high
 and the young men came dancing, whirling round in rings
 and among them the flutes and harps kept up their stirring call—
 women rushed to the doors and each stood moved with wonder.
 And the people massed, streaming into the marketplace 580
 where a quarrel had broken out and two men struggled
 over the blood-price for a kinsman just murdered.
 One declaimed in public, vowing payment in full—
 the other spurned him, he would not take a thing—
 so both men pressed for a judge to cut the knot.

The crowd cheered on both, they took both sides,
 but heralds held them back as the city elders sat
 on polished stone benches, forming the sacred circle,
 grasping in hand the staffs of clear-voiced heralds,
 and each leapt to his feet to plead the case in turn. 590
 Two bars of solid gold shone on the ground before them,
 a prize for the judge who'd speak the straightest verdict.

But circling the other city camped a divided army
 gleaming in battle-gear, and two plans split their ranks:
 to plunder the city or share the riches with its people,
 hoards the handsome citadel stored within its depths.
 But the people were not surrendering, not at all.
 They armed for a raid, hoping to break the siege—
 loving wives and innocent children standing guard
 on the ramparts, flanked by elders bent with age 600
 as men marched out to war. Ares and Pallas led them,
 both burnished gold, gold the attire they donned, and great,
 magnificent in their armor—gods for all the world,
 looming up in their brilliance, towering over troops.
 And once they reached the perfect spot for attack,
 a watering place where all the herds collected,
 there they crouched, wrapped in glowing bronze.
 Detached from the ranks, two scouts took up their posts,
 the eyes of the army waiting to spot a convoy,
 the enemy's flocks and crook-horned cattle coming . . . 610
 Come they did, quickly, two shepherds behind them,
 playing their hearts out on their pipes—treachery
 never crossed their minds. But the soldiers saw them,
 rushed them, cut off at a stroke the herds of oxen
 and sleek sheep-flocks glistening silver-gray
 and killed the herdsmen too. Now the besiegers,
 soon as they heard the uproar burst from the cattle
 as they debated, huddled in council, mounted at once
 behind their racing teams, rode hard to the rescue,
 arrived at once, and lining up for assault 620
 both armies battled it out along the river banks—
 they raked each other with hurtling bronze-tipped spears.

And Strife and Havoc plunged in the fight, and violent Death—
 now seizing a man alive with fresh wounds, now one unhurt,
 now hauling a dead man through the slaughter by the heels,
 the cloak on her back stained red with human blood.
 So they clashed and fought like living, breathing men
 grappling each other's corpses, dragging off the dead.

And he forged a fallow field, broad rich plowland
 tilled for the third time, and across it crews of plowmen 630
 wheeled their teams, driving them up and back and soon
 as they'd reach the end-strip, moving into the turn,
 a man would run up quickly
 and hand them a cup of honeyed, mellow wine
 as the crews would turn back down along the furrows,
 pressing again to reach the end of the deep fallow field
 and the earth churned black behind them, like earth churning,
 solid gold as it was—that was the wonder of Hephaestus' work.

And he forged a king's estate where harvesters labored,
 reaping the ripe grain, swinging their whetted scythes. 640
 Some stalks fell in line with the reapers, row on row,
 and others the sheaf-binders girded round with ropes,
 three binders standing over the sheaves, behind them
 boys gathering up the cut swaths, filling their arms,
 supplying grain to the binders, endless bundles.
 And there in the midst the king,
 scepter in hand at the head of the reaping-rows,
 stood tall in silence, rejoicing in his heart.
 And off to the side, beneath a spreading oak,
 the heralds were setting out the harvest feast, 650
 they were dressing a great ox they had slaughtered,
 while attendant women poured out barley, generous,
 glistening handfuls strewn for the reapers' midday meal.

And he forged a thriving vineyard loaded with clusters,
 bunches of lustrous grapes in gold, ripening deep purple
 and climbing vines shot up on silver vine-poles.
 And round it he cut a ditch in dark blue enamel

and round the ditch he staked a fence in tin.
 And one lone footpath led toward the vineyard
 and down it the pickers ran 660
 whenever they went to strip the grapes at vintage—
 girls and boys, their hearts leaping in innocence,
 bearing away the sweet ripe fruit in wicker baskets.
 And there among them a young boy plucked his lyre,
 so clear it could break the heart with longing,
 and what he sang was a dirge for the dying year,
 lovely . . . his fine voice rising and falling low
 as the rest followed, all together, frisking, singing,
 shouting, their dancing footsteps beating out the time.

And he forged on the shield a herd of longhorn cattle,
 working the bulls in beaten gold and tin, lowing loud 670
 and rumbling out of the farmyard dung to pasture
 along a rippling stream, along the swaying reeds.
 And the golden drovers kept the herd in line,
 four in all, with nine dogs at their heels,
 their paws flickering quickly—a savage roar!—
 a crashing attack—and a pair of ramping lions
 had seized a bull from the cattle's front ranks—
 he bellowed out as they dragged him off in agony.
 Packs of dogs and the young herdsmen rushed to help 680
 but the lions ripping open the hide of the huge bull
 were gulping down the guts and the black pooling blood
 while the herdsmen yelled the fast pack on—no use.
 The hounds shrank from sinking teeth in the lions,
 they balked, hunching close, barking, cringing away.

And the famous crippled Smith forged a meadow
 deep in a shaded glen for shimmering flocks to graze,
 with shepherds' steadings, well-roofed huts and sheepfolds.

And the crippled Smith brought all his art to bear
 on a dancing circle, broad as the circle Daedalus 69
 once laid out on Cnossos' spacious fields
 for Ariadne the girl with lustrous hair.

Here young boys and girls, beauties courted
 with costly gifts of oxen, danced and danced,
 linking their arms, gripping each other's wrists.
 And the girls wore robes of linen light and flowing,
 the boys wore finespun tunics rubbed with a gloss of oil,
 the girls were crowned with a bloom of fresh garlands,
 the boys swung golden daggers hung on silver belts.
 And now they would run in rings on their skilled feet, 700
 nimbly, quick as a crouching potter spins his wheel,
 palming it smoothly, giving it practice twirls
 to see it run, and now they would run in rows,
 in rows crisscrossing rows—rapturous dancing.
 A breathless crowd stood round them struck with joy
 and through them a pair of tumblers dashed and sprang,
 whirling in leaping handsprings, leading out the danc

And he forged the Ocean River's mighty power girdling
 round the outmost rim of the welded indestructible shield.

And once the god had made that great and massive shield 710
 he made Achilles a breastplate brighter than gleaming fire,
 he made him a sturdy helmet to fit the fighter's temples,
 beautiful, burnished work, and raised its golden crest
 and made him greaves of flexing, pliant tin.

Now,
 when the famous crippled Smith had finished off
 that grand array of armor, lifting it in his arms
 he laid it all at the feet of Achilles' mother Thetis—
 and down she flashed like a hawk from snowy Mount Olympus
 bearing the brilliant gear, the god of fire's gift.

H O M E R

PENGUIN BOOKS



The
Iliad

TRANSLATED BY
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INTRODUCTION AND
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