



The Death of Hector

So all through Troy the men who had fled like panicked fawns were wiping off their sweat, drinking away their thirst, leaning along the city's massive ramparts now while Achaean troops, sloping shields to shoulders, closed against the walls. But there stood Hector, shackled fast by his deadly fate, holding his ground, exposed in front of Troy and the Scaean Gates. And now Apollo turned to taunt Achilles:

"Why are you chasing *me*? Why waste your speed?—son of Peleus, you a mortal and I a deathless god. You still don't know that I am immortal, do you?—straining to catch me in your fury! Have you forgotten? There's a war to fight with the Trojans you stampeded, look, they're packed inside their city walls, but you, you've slipped away out here. You can't kill *me*—"

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I can never die—it's not my fate!"

Enraged at that,

Achilles shouted in mid-stride, "You've blocked my way,
you distant, deadly Archer, deadliest god of all—
you made me swerve away from the rampart there.
Else what a mighty Trojan army had gnawed the dust
before they could ever straggle through their gates!
Now you've robbed me of great glory, saved their lives
with all your deathless ease. Nothing for you to fear,
no punishment to come. Oh I'd pay you back
if I only had the power at my command!"

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No more words—he dashed toward the city,
heart racing for some great exploit, rushing on
like a champion stallion drawing a chariot full tilt,
sweeping across the plain in easy, tearing strides—
so Achilles hurtled on, driving legs and knees.

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And old King Priam was first to see him coming,
surging over the plain, blazing like the star
that rears at harvest, flaming up in its brilliance,—
far outshining the countless stars in the night sky,
that star they call Orion's Dog—brightest of all
but a fatal sign emblazoned on the heavens,
it brings such killing fever down on wretched men.
So the bronze flared on his chest as on he raced—
and the old man moaned, flinging both hands high,
beating his head and groaning deep he called,
begging his dear son who stood before the gates,
unshakable, furious to fight Achilles to the death.
The old man cried, pitifully, hands reaching out to him,
"Oh Hector! Don't just stand there, don't, dear child,
waiting that man's attack—alone, cut off from friends!
You'll meet your doom at once, beaten down by Achilles,
so much stronger than you—that hard, headlong man.
Oh if only the gods loved him as much as I do . . .
dogs and vultures would eat his fallen corpse at once!—
with what a load of misery lifted from my spirit.

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That man who robbed me of many sons, brave boys,
cutting them down or selling them off as slaves,
shipped to islands half the world away . . .
Even now there are two, Lycaon and Polydorus—
I cannot find them among the soldiers crowding Troy,
those sons Laothoë bore me, Laothoë queen of women.
But if they are still alive in the enemy's camp,
then we'll ransom them back with bronze and gold.
We have hoards inside the walls, the rich dowry .
old and famous Altes presented with his daughter.
But if they're dead already, gone to the House of Death,
what grief to their mother's heart and mine—we gave them life.
For the rest of Troy, though, just a moment's grief
unless you too are battered down by Achilles.
Back, come back! Inside the walls, my boy!
Rescue the men of Troy and the Trojan women—
don't hand the great glory to Peleus' son,
bereft of your own sweet life yourself.

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Pity me too!—

still in my senses, true, but a harrowed, broken man
marked out by doom—past the threshold of old age . . .
and Father Zeus will waste me with a hideous fate,
and after I've lived to look on so much horror!
My sons laid low, my daughters dragged away
and the treasure-chambers looted, helpless babies
hurled to the earth in the red barbarity of war . . .
my sorts' wives hauled off by the Argives' bloody hands!
And I, I last of all—the dogs before my doors
will eat me raw, once some enemy brings me down
with his sharp bronze sword or spits me with a spear,
wrenching the life out of my body, yes, the very dogs
I bred in my own halls to share my table, guard my gates—
mad, rabid at heart they'll lap their master's blood
and loll before my doors.

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Ah for a young man
all looks fine and noble if he goes down in war,
hacked to pieces under a slashing bronze blade—
he lies there dead . . . but whatever death lays bare,

all wounds are marks of glory. When an old man's killed
and the dogs go at the gray head and the gray beard
and mutilate the genitals—that is the cruelest sight
in all our wretched lives!"

So the old man groaned 90
and seizing his gray hair tore it out by the roots
but he could not shake the fixed resolve of Hector.
And his mother wailed now, standing beside Priam,
weeping freely, loosing her robes with one hand
and holding out her bare breast with the other,
her words pouring forth in a flight of grief and tears:
"Hector, my child! Look—have some respect for *this!*
Pity your mother too, if I ever gave you the breast
to soothe your troubles, remember it now, dear boy—
beat back that savage man from safe inside the walls! 100
Don't go forth, a champion pitted against him—
merciless, brutal man. If he kills you now,
how can I ever mourn you on your deathbed?—
dear branch in bloom, dear child I brought to birth!—
Neither I nor your wife, that warm, generous woman . . .
Now far beyond our reach, now by the Argive ships
the rushing dogs will tear you, bolt your flesh!"

So they wept, the two of them crying out
to their dear son, both pleading time and again
but they could not shake the fixed resolve of Hector. 110
No, he waited Achilles, coming on, gigantic in power.
As a snake in the hills, guarding his hole, awaits a man—
bloated with poison, deadly hatred seething inside him,
glances flashing fire as he coils round his lair . . .
so Hector, nursing his quenchless fury, gave no ground,
leaning his burnished shield against a jutting wall,
but harried still, he probed his own brave heart:
"No way out. If I slip inside the gates and walls,
Polydamas will be first to heap disgrace on me—
he was the one who urged me to lead our Trojans 120
back to Ilium just last night, the disastrous night
Achilles rose in arms like a god. But did I give way?

Not at all. And how much better it would have been!
Now my army's ruined, thanks to my own reckless pride,
I would die of shame to face the men of Troy
and the Trojan women trailing their long robes . . .
Someone less of a man than I will say, 'Our Hector—
staking all on his own strength, he destroyed his army!'
So they will mutter. So now, better by far for me
to stand up to Achilles, kill him, come home alive 130
or die at his hands in glory out before the walls.
But wait—what if I put down my studded shield
and heavy helmet, prop my spear on the rampart
and go forth, just as I am, to meet Achilles,
noble Prince Achilles . . .
why, I could promise to give back Helen, yes,
and all her treasures with her, all those riches
Paris once hauled home to Troy in the hollow ships—
and they were the cause of all our endless fighting—
Yes, yes, return it all to the sons of Atreus now 140
to haul away, and then, at the same time, divide
the rest with all the Argives, all the city holds,
and then I'd take an oath for the Trojan royal council
that we will hide nothing! Share and share alike the hoards
our handsome citadel stores within its depths and—
Why debate, my friend? Why thrash things out?
I must not go and implore him. He'll show no mercy,
no respect for me, my rights—he'll cut me down
straight off—stripped of defenses like a woman
once I have loosed the armor off my body. 150
No way to parley with that man—not now—
not from behind some oak or rock to whisper,
like a boy and a young girl, lovers' secrets
a boy and girl might whisper to each other . . .
Better to clash in battle, now, at once—
see which fighter Zeus awards the glory!"

So he wavered,
waiting there, but Achilles was closing on him now
like the god of war, the fighter's helmet flashing,
over his right shoulder shaking the Pelian ash spear,

that terror, and the bronze around his body flared
 like a raging fire or the rising, blazing sun. 160
 Hector looked up, saw him, started to tremble,
 nerve gone, he could hold his ground no longer,
 he left the gates behind and away he fled in fear—
 and Achilles went for him, fast, sure of his speed
 as the wild mountain hawk, the quickest thing on wings,
 launching smoothly, swooping down on a cringing dove
 and the dove flits out from under, the hawk screaming
 over the quarry, plunging over and over, his fury
 driving him down to beak and tear his kill— 170
 so Achilles flew at him, breakneck on in fury
 with Hector fleeing along the walls of Troy,
 fast as his legs would go. On and on they raced,
 passing the lookout point, passing the wild fig tree
 tossed by the wind, always out from under the ramparts
 down the wagon trail they careered until they reached
 the clear running springs where whirling Scamander
 rises up from its double wellsprings bubbling strong—
 and one runs hot and the steam goes up around it,
 drifting thick as if fire burned at its core 180
 but the other even in summer gushes cold
 as hail or freezing snow or water chilled to ice . . .
 And here, close to the springs, lie washing-pools
 scooped out in the hollow rocks and broad and smooth
 where the wives of Troy and all their lovely daughters
 would wash their glistening robes in the old days,
 the days of peace before the sons of Achaea came . . .
 Past these they raced, one escaping, one in pursuit
 and the one who fled was great but the one pursuing
 greater, even greater—their pace mounting in speed 190
 since both men strove, not for a sacrificial beast
 or oxhide trophy, prizes runners fight for, no,
 they raced for the life of Hector breaker of horses.
 Like powerful stallions sweeping round the post for trophies,
 galloping full stretch with some fine prize at stake,
 a tripod, say, or woman offered up at funeral games
 for some brave hero fallen—so the two of them

whirled three times around the city of Priam,
 sprinting at top speed while all the gods gazed down,
 and the father of men and gods broke forth among them now: 200
 “Unbearable—a man I love, hunted round his own city walls
 and right before my eyes. My heart grieves for Hector.
 Hector who burned so many oxen in my honor, rich cuts,
 now on the rugged crests of Ida, now on Ilium’s heights.
 But now, look, brilliant Achilles courses him round
 the city of Priam in all his savage, lethal speed.
 Come, you immortals, think this through. Decide.
 Either we pluck the man from death and save his life
 or strike him down at last, here at Achilles’ hands—
 for all his fighting heart.”

But immortal Athena, 210
 her gray eyes wide, protested strongly: “Father!
 Lord of the lightning, king of the black cloud,
 what are you saying? A man, a mere mortal,
 his doom sealed long ago? You’d set him free
 from all the pains of death?

Do as you please—
 but none of the deathless gods will ever praise you.”

And Zeus who marshals the thunderheads replied,
 “Courage, Athena, third-born of the gods, dear child.
 Nothing I said was meant in earnest, trust me,
 I mean you all the good will in the world. Go. 220
 Do as your own impulse bids you. Hold back no more.”

So he launched Athena already poised for action—
 down the goddess swept from Olympus’ craggy peaks.

And swift Achilles kept on coursing Hector, nonstop
 as a hound in the mountains starts a fawn from its lair,
 hunting him down the gorges, down the narrow glens
 and the fawn goes to ground, hiding deep in brush
 but the hound comes racing fast, nosing him out
 until he lands his kill. So Hector could never throw
 Achilles off his trail, the swift racer Achilles— 230

time and again he'd make a dash for the Dardan Gates,
 trying to rush beneath the rock-built ramparts, hoping
 men on the heights might save him, somehow, raining spears
 but time and again Achilles would intercept him quickly,
 heading him off, forcing him out across the plain
 and always sprinting along the city side himself—
 endless as in a dream . . .

when a man can't catch another fleeing on ahead
 and he can never escape nor his rival overtake him—
 so the one could never run the other down in his speed 240
 nor the other spring away. And how could Hector have fled
 the fates of death so long? How unless one last time,
 one final time Apollo had swept in close beside him,
 driving strength in his legs and knees to race the wind?
 And brilliant Achilles shook his head at the armies,
 never letting them hurl their sharp spears at Hector—
 someone might snatch the glory, Achilles come in second.
 But once they reached the springs for the fourth time,
 then Father Zeus held out his sacred golden scales:
 in them he placed two fates of death that lays men low— 250
 one for Achilles, one for Hector breaker of horses—
 and gripping the beam mid-haft the Father raised it high
 and down went Hector's day of doom, dragging him down
 to the strong House of Death—and god Apollo left him.
 Athena rushed to Achilles, her bright eyes gleaming,
 standing shoulder-to-shoulder, winging orders now:
 "At last our hopes run high, my brilliant Achilles—
 Father Zeus must love you—
 we'll sweep great glory back to Achaea's fleet,
 we'll kill this Hector, mad as he is for battle! 260
 No way for him to escape us now, no longer—
 not even if Phoebus the distant deadly Archer
 goes through torments, pleading for Hector's life,
 groveling over and over before our storming Father Zeus.
 But you, you hold your ground and catch your breath
 while I run Hector down and persuade the man
 to fight you face-to-face."

So Athena commanded

and he obeyed, rejoicing at heart—Achilles stopped,
 leaning against his ashen spearshaft barbed in bronze.
 And Athena left him there, caught up with Hector at once, 270
 and taking the build and vibrant voice of Deiphobus
 stood shoulder-to-shoulder with him, winging orders:
 "Dear brother, how brutally swift Achilles hunts you—
 coursing you round the city of Priam in all his lethal speed!
 Come, let us stand our ground together—beat him back."

"Deiphobus!"—Hector, his helmet flashing, called out to her—
 "dearest of all my brothers, all these warring years,
 of all the sons that Priam and Hecuba produced!
 Now I'm determined to praise you all the more,
 you who dared—seeing me in these straits— 280
 to venture out from the walls, all for *my* sake,
 while the others stay inside and cling to safety."

The goddess answered quickly, her eyes blazing,
 "True, dear brother—how your father and mother both
 implored me, time and again, clutching my knees,
 and the comrades round me begging me to stay!
 Such was the fear that broke them, man for man,
 but the heart within me broke with grief for you.
 Now headlong on and fight! No letup, no lance spared!
 So now, now we'll *see* if Achilles kills us both 290
 and hauls our bloody armor back to the beaked ships
 or he goes down in pain beneath your spear."

Athena luring him on with all her immortal cunning—
 and now, at last, as the two came closing for the kill
 it was tall Hector, helmet flashing, who led off:
 "No more running from you in fear, Achilles!
 Not as before. Three times I fled around
 the great city of Priam—I lacked courage then
 to stand your onslaught. Now my spirit stirs me
 to meet you face-to-face. Now kill or be killed! 300
 Come, we'll swear to the gods, the highest witnesses—
 the gods will oversee our binding pacts. I swear

I will never mutilate you—merciless as you are—
if Zeus allows me to last it out and tear your life away.
But once I've stripped your glorious armor, Achilles,
I will give your body back to your loyal comrades.
Swear you'll do the same."

A swift dark glance

and the headstrong runner answered, "Hector, stop!
You unforgivable, you . . . don't talk to me of pacts.
There are no binding oaths between men and lions—
wolves and lambs can enjoy no meeting of the minds—
they are all bent on hating each other to the death.
So with you and me. No love between us. No truce
till one or the other falls and gluts with blood
Ares who hacks at men behind his rawhide shield.
Come, call up whatever courage you can muster.
Life or death—now prove yourself a spearman,
a daring man of war! No more escape for you—
Athena will kill you with my spear in just a moment.
Now you'll pay at a stroke for all my comrades' grief,
all you killed in the fury of your spear!"

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With that,

shaft poised, he hurled and his spear's long shadow flew
but seeing it coming glorious Hector ducked away,
crouching down, watching the bronze tip fly past
and stab the earth—but Athena snatched it up
and passed it back to Achilles
and Hector the gallant captain never saw her.
He sounded out a challenge to Peleus' princely son:
"You missed, look—the great godlike Achilles!
So you knew nothing at all from Zeus about my death—
and yet how sure you were! All bluff, cunning with words,
that's all you are—trying to make me fear you,
lose my nerve, forget my fighting strength.
Well, you'll never plant your lance in my back
as I flee *you* in fear—plunge it through my chest
as I come charging in, if a god gives you the chance!
But now it's for you to dodge *my* brazen spear—

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I wish you'd bury it in your body to the hilt.
How much lighter the war would be for Trojans then
if you, their greatest scourge, were dead and gone!"

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Shaft poised, he hurled and his spear's long shadow flew
and it struck Achilles' shield—a dead-center hit—
but off and away it glanced and Hector seethed,
his hurtling spear, his whole arm's power poured
in a wasted shot. He stood there, cast down . . .
he had no spear in reserve. So Hector shouted out
to Deiphobus bearing his white shield—with a ringing shout
he called for a heavy lance—

but the man was nowhere near him,
vanished—

yes and Hector knew the truth in his heart
and the fighter cried aloud, "My time has come!
At last the gods have called me down to death.
I thought he was at my side, the hero Deiphobus—
he's safe inside the walls, Athena's tricked me blind.
And now death, grim death is looming up beside me,
no longer far away. No way to escape it now. This,
this was their pleasure after all, sealed long ago—
Zeus and the son of Zeus, the distant deadly Archer—
though often before now they rushed to my defense.
So now I meet my doom. Well let me die—
but not without struggle, not without glory, no,
in some great clash of arms that even men to come
will hear of down the years!"

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And on that resolve

he drew the whetted sword that hung at his side,
tempered, massive, and gathering all his force
he swooped like a soaring eagle
launching down from the dark clouds to earth
to snatch some helpless lamb or trembling hare.
So Hector swooped now, swinging his whetted sword
and Achilles charged too, bursting with rage, barbaric,
guarding his chest with the well-wrought blazoned shield,

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head tossing his gleaming helmet, four horns strong
 and the golden plumes shook that the god of fire
 drove in bristling thick along its ridge.
 Bright as that star amid the stars in the night sky,
 star of the evening, brightest star that rides the heavens,
 so fire flared from the sharp point of the spear Achilles
 brandished high in his right hand, bent on Hector's death,
 scanning his splendid body—where to pierce it best?
 The rest of his flesh seemed all encased in armor,
 burnished, brazen—*Achilles'* armor that Hector stripped
 from strong Patroclus when he killed him—true,
 but one spot lay exposed,
 where collarbones lift the neckbone off the shoulders,
 the open throat, where the end of life comes quickest—*there*
 as Hector charged in fury brilliant Achilles drove his spear
 and the point went stabbing clean through the tender neck
 but the heavy bronze weapon failed to slash the windpipe—
 Hector could still gasp out some words, some last reply . . .
 he crashed in the dust—

380

godlike Achilles gloried over him:

"Hector—surely you thought when you stripped Patroclus' armor
 that you, you would be safe! Never a fear of me—
 far from the fighting as I was—you fool!
 Left behind there, down by the beaked ships
 his great avenger waited, a greater man by far—
 that man was I, and I smashed your strength! And you—
 the dogs and birds will maul you, shame your corpse
 while Achaeans bury my dear friend in glory!"

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Struggling for breath, Hector, his helmet flashing,
 said, "I beg you, beg you by your life, your parents—
 don't let the dogs devour me by the Argive ships!
 Wait, take the princely ransom of bronze and gold,
 the gifts my father and noble mother will give you—
 but give my body to friends to carry home again,
 so Trojan men and Trojan women can do me honor
 with fitting rites of fire once I am dead."

Staring grimly, the proud runner Achilles answered,
 "Beg no more, you fawning dog—begging me by my parents!
 Would to god my rage, my fury would drive me now
 to hack your flesh away and eat you raw—
 such agonies you have caused me! Ransom?
 No man alive could keep the dog-packs off you,
 not if they haul in ten, twenty times that ransom
 and pile it here before me and promise fortunes more—
 no, not even if Dardan Priam should offer to weigh out
 your bulk in gold! Not even then will your noble mother
 lay you on your deathbed, mourn the son she bore . . .
 The dogs and birds will rend you—blood and bone!"

410

At the point of death, Hector, his helmet flashing,
 said, "I know you well—I see my fate before me.
 Never a chance that I could win you over . . .
 Iron inside your chest, that heart of yours.
 But now beware, or my curse will draw god's wrath
 upon your head, that day when Paris and lord Apollo—
 for all your fighting heart—destroy you at the Scaean Gates!"

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Death cut him short. The end closed in around him.
 Flying free of his limbs
 his soul went winging down to the House of Death,
 wailing his fate, leaving his manhood far behind,
 his young and supple strength. But brilliant Achilles
 taunted Hector's body, dead as he was, "Die, die!
 For my own death, I'll meet it freely—whenever Zeus
 and the other deathless gods would like to bring it on!"

430

With that he wrenched his bronze spear from the corpse,
 laid it aside and ripped the bloody armor off the back.
 And the other sons of Achaea, running up around him,
 crowded closer, all of them gazing wonder-struck
 at the build and marvelous, lithe beauty of Hector.
 And not a man came forward who did not stab his body,

glancing toward a comrade, laughing: "Ah, look here—
how much softer he is to handle now, this Hector, 440
than when he gutted our ships with roaring fire!"

Standing over him, so they'd gloat and stab his body.
But once he had stripped the corpse the proud runner Achilles
took his stand in the midst of all the Argive troops
and urged them on with a flight of winging orders:
"Friends—lords of the Argives, O my captains!
Now that the gods have let me kill this man
who caused us agonies, loss on crushing loss—
more than the rest of all their men combined—
come, let us ring their walls in armor, test them, 450
see what recourse the Trojans still may have in mind.
Will they abandon the city heights with this man fallen?
Or brace for a last, dying stand though Hector's gone?
But wait—what am I saying? Why this deep debate?
Down by the ships a body lies unwept, unburied—
Patroclus . . . I will never forget him,
not as long as I'm still among the living
and my springing knees will lift and drive me on.
Though the dead forget their dead in the House of Death,
I will remember, even there, my dear companion.

Now, 460
come, you sons of Achaea, raise a song of triumph!
Down to the ships we march and bear this corpse on high—
we have won ourselves great glory. We have brought
magnificent Hector down, that man the Trojans
glorified in their city like a god!"

So he triumphed
and now he was bent on outrage, on shaming noble Hector.
Piercing the tendons, ankle to heel behind both feet,
he knotted straps of rawhide through them both,
lashed them to his chariot, left the head to drag
and mounting the car, hoisting the famous arms aboard, 470
he whipped his team to a run and breakneck on they flew,
holding nothing back. And a thick cloud of dust rose up
from the man they dragged, his dark hair swirling round

that head so handsome once, all tumbled low in the dust—
since Zeus had given him over to his enemies now
to be defiled in the land of his own fathers.

So his whole head was dragged down in the dust.
And now his mother began to tear her hair . . .
she flung her shining veil to the ground and raised 480
a high, shattering scream, looking down at her son.
Pitifully his loving father groaned and round the king
his people cried with grief and wailing seized the city—
for all the world as if all Troy were torched and smoldering
down from the looming brows of the citadel to her roots.
Priam's people could hardly hold the old man back,
frantic, mad to go rushing out the Dardan Gates.
He begged them all, groveling in the filth,
crying out to them, calling each man by name,
"Let go, my friends! Much as you care for me,
let me hurry out of the city, make my way, 490
all on my own, to Achaea's waiting ships!
I must implore that terrible, violent man . . .
Perhaps—who knows?—he may respect my age,
may pity an old man. He has a father too,
as old as I am—Peleus sired him once,
Peleus reared him to be the scourge of Troy
but most of all to me—he made my life a hell.
So many sons he slaughtered, just coming into bloom . . .
but grieving for all the rest, one breaks my heart the most
and stabbing grief for him will take me down to Death— 500
my Hector—would to god he had perished in my arms!
Then his mother who bore him—oh so doomed,
she and I could glut ourselves with grief."

So the voice of the king rang out in tears,
the citizens wailed in answer, and noble Hecuba
led the wives of Troy in a throbbing chant of sorrow:
"O my child—my desolation! How can I go on living?
What agonies must I suffer now, now *you* are dead and gone?
You were my pride throughout the city night and day—

a blessing to us all, the men and women of Troy:
throughout the city they saluted you like a god.
You, you were their greatest glory while you lived—
now death and fate have seized you, dragged you down!”

510

Her voice rang out in tears, but the wife of Hector
had not heard a thing. No messenger brought the truth
of how her husband made his stand outside the gates.
She was weaving at her loom, deep in the high halls,
working flowered braiding into a dark red folding robe.
And she called her well-kempt women through the house
to set a large three-legged cauldron over the fire
so Hector could have his steaming hot bath
when he came home from battle—poor woman,
she never dreamed how far he was from bathing,
struck down at Achilles’ hands by blazing-eyed Athena.
But she heard the groans and wails of grief from the rampart now
and her body shook, her shuttle dropped to the ground,
she called out to her lovely waiting women, “Quickly—
two of you follow me—I must see what’s happened.
That cry—that was Hector’s honored mother I heard!
My heart’s pounding, leaping up in my throat,
the knees beneath me paralyzed—Oh I know it . . .
something terrible’s coming down on Priam’s children.
Pray god the news will never reach my ears!
Yes but I dread it so—what if great Achilles
has cut my Hector off from the city, daring Hector,
and driven him out across the plain, and all alone?—
He may have put an end to that fatal headstrong pride
that always seized my Hector—never hanging back
with the main force of men, always charging ahead,
giving ground to no man in his fury!”

520

530

So she cried,

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dashing out of the royal halls like a madwoman,
her heart racing hard, her women close behind her.
But once she reached the tower where soldiers massed
she stopped on the rampart, looked down and saw it all—
saw him dragged before the city, stallions galloping,

dragging Hector back to Achaea’s beaked warships—
ruthless work. The world went black as night
before her eyes, she fainted, falling backward,
gasping away her life breath . . .

She flung to the winds her glittering headdress,
the cap and the coronet, braided band and veil,
all the regalia golden Aphrodite gave her once,
the day that Hector, helmet aflash in sunlight,
led her home to Troy from her father’s house
with countless wedding gifts to win her heart.

550

But crowding round her now her husband’s sisters
and brothers’ wives supported her in their midst,
and she, terrified, stunned to the point of death,
struggling for breath now and coming back to life,
burst out in grief among the Trojan women: “O Hector—
I am destroyed! Both born to the same fate after all!
You, you at Troy in the halls of King Priam—
I at Thebes, under the timberline of Placos,
Eetion’s house . . . He raised me as a child,
that man of doom, his daughter just as doomed—
would to god he’d never fathered *me!*”

560

Now you go down

to the House of Death, the dark depths of the earth,
and leave me here to waste away in grief, a widow
lost in the royal halls—and the boy only a baby,
the son we bore together, you and I so doomed.
Hector, what help are you to him, now you are dead?—
what help is he to you? Think, even if he escapes
the wrenching horrors of war against the Argives,
pain and labor will plague him all his days to come.
Strangers will mark his lands off, stealing his estates.
The day that orphans a youngster cuts him off from friends.
And he hangs his head low, humiliated in every way . . .
his cheeks stained with tears, and pressed by hunger
the boy goes up to his father’s old companions,
tugging at one man’s cloak, another’s tunic,
and some will pity him, true,
and one will give him a little cup to drink,

570

580

enough to wet his lips, not quench his thirst.
 But then some bully with both his parents living
 beats him from the banquet, fists and abuses flying:
 'You, get out—you've got no father feasting with us here!'
 And the boy, sobbing, trails home to his widowed mother . . .
 Astyanax!

And years ago, propped on his father's knee,
 he would only eat the marrow, the richest cuts of lamb,
 and when sleep came on him and he had quit his play, 590
 cradled warm in his nurse's arms he'd drowse off,
 snug in a soft bed, his heart brimmed with joy.
 Now what suffering, now he's lost his father—

Astyanax!

The Lord of the City, so the Trojans called him,
 because it was you, Hector, you and you alone
 who shielded the gates and the long walls of Troy.
 But now by the beaked ships, far from your parents,
 glistening worms will wriggle through your flesh,
 once the dogs have had their fill of your naked corpse—
 though we have such stores of clothing laid up in the halls, 600
 fine things, a joy to the eye, the work of women's hands.
 Now, by god, I'll burn them all, blazing to the skies!
 No use to you now, they'll never shroud your body—
 but they will be your glory
 burned by the Trojan men and women in your honor!"

Her voice rang out in tears and the women wailed in answer.

H O M E R

PENGUIN BOOKS



The
Iliad

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