



Achilles and Priam

The games were over now. The gathered armies scattered,
 each man to his fast ship, and fighters turned their minds
 to thoughts of food and the sweet warm grip of sleep.
 But Achilles kept on grieving for his friend,
 the memory burning on . . .
 and all-subduing sleep could not take him,
 not now, he turned and twisted, side to side,
 he longed for Patroclus' manhood, his gallant heart—
 What rough campaigns they'd fought to an end together,
 what hardships they had suffered, cleaving their way
 through wars of men and pounding waves at sea.
 The memories flooded over him, live tears flowing,
 and now he'd lie on his side, now flat on his back,
 now facedown again. At last he'd leap to his feet,
 wander in anguish, aimless along the surf, and dawn on dawn

10

flaming over the sea and shore would find him pacing.
 Then he'd yoke his racing team to the chariot-harness,
 lash the corpse of Hector behind the car for dragging
 and haul him three times round the dead Patroclus' tomb,
 and then he'd rest again in his tents and leave the body
 sprawled facedown in the dust. But Apollo pitied Hector—
 dead man though he was—and warded all corruption off
 from Hector's corpse and round him, head to foot,
 the great god wrapped the golden shield of storm
 so his skin would never rip as Achilles dragged him on.

20

And so he kept on raging, shaming noble Hector,
 but the gods in bliss looked down and pitied Priam's son.
 They kept on urging the sharp-eyed giant-killer Hermes
 to go and steal the body, a plan that pleased them all,
 but not Hera, Poseidon or the girl with blazing eyes.
 They clung to their deathless hate of sacred Troy,
 Priam and Priam's people, just as they had at first
 when Paris in all his madness launched the war.
 He offended Athena and Hera—both goddesses.
 When they came to his shepherd's fold he favored Love
 who dangled before his eyes the lust that loosed disaster.
 But now, at the twelfth dawn since Hector's death,
 lord Apollo rose and addressed the immortal powers:
 "Hard-hearted you are, you gods, you live for cruelty!
 Did Hector never burn in your honor thighs of oxen
 and flawless, full-grown goats? Now you cannot
 bring yourselves to save him—even his corpse—
 so his wife can see him, his mother and his child,
 his father Priam and Priam's people: how they'd rush
 to burn his body on the pyre and give him royal rites!
 But murderous Achilles—you gods, you *choose* to help Achilles.
 That man without a shred of decency in his heart . . .
 his temper can never bend and change—like some lion
 going his own barbaric way, giving in to his power,
 his brute force and wild pride, as down he swoops
 on the flocks of men to seize his savage feast.
 Achilles has lost all pity! No shame in the man,

30

40

50

shame that does great harm or drives men on to good.
 No doubt some mortal has suffered a dearer loss than this,
 a brother born in the same womb, or even a son . . .
 he grieves, he weeps, but then his tears are through.
 The Fates have given mortals hearts that can endure.
 But this Achilles—first he slaughters Hector,
 he rips away the noble prince's life
 then lashes him to his chariot, drags him round 60
 his beloved comrade's tomb. But why, I ask you?
 What good will it do him? What honor will he gain?
 Let that man beware, or great and glorious as he is,
 we mighty gods will wheel on him in anger—look,
 he outrages the senseless clay in all his fury!"

But white-armed Hera flared at him in anger:
 "Yes, there'd be some merit even in what *you* say,
 lord of the silver bow—if all you gods, in fact,
 would set Achilles and Hector high in equal honor.
 But Hector is mortal. He sucked a woman's breast. 70
 Achilles sprang from a goddess—one I reared myself:
 I brought her up and gave her in marriage to a man,
 to Peleus, dearest to all your hearts, you gods.
 All you gods, you shared in the wedding rites,
 and so did you, Apollo—there you sat at the feast
 and struck your lyre. What company you keep now,
 these wretched Trojans. You—forever faithless!"

But Zeus who marshals the storm clouds warned his queen,
 "Now, Hera, don't fly into such a rage at fellow gods.
 These two can never attain the same degree of honor. 80
 Still, the immortals loved Prince Hector dearly,
 best of all the mortals born in Troy . . .
 so *I* loved him, at least:
 he never stinted with gifts to please my heart.
 Never once did my altar lack its share of victims,
 winecups tipped and the deep smoky savor. These,
 these are the gifts we claim—they are our rights.
 But as for stealing courageous Hector's body,

we must abandon the idea—not a chance in the world
 behind Achilles' back. For Thetis is always there, 90
 his mother always hovering near him night and day.
 Now would one of you gods call Thetis to my presence?—
 so I can declare to her my solemn, sound decree:
 Achilles must receive a ransom from King Priam,
 Achilles must give Hector's body back."

So he decreed
 and Iris, racing a gale-wind down with Zeus's message,
 mid-sea between Samos and Imbros' rugged cliffs
 dove in a black swell as groaning breakers roared.
 Down she plunged to the bottom fast as a lead weight
 sheathed in a glinting lure of wild bull's horn, 100
 bearing hooked death to the ravenous fish.
 And deep in a hollow cave she came on Thetis.
 Gathered round her sat the other immortal sea-nymphs
 while Thetis amidst them mourned her brave son's fate,
 doomed to die, she knew, on the fertile soil of Troy,
 far from his native land. Quick as the wind now
 Iris rushed to the goddess, urging, "Rise, Thetis—
 Zeus with his everlasting counsels calls you now!"
 Shifting on her glistening feet, the goddess answered,
 "Why . . . what does the great god want with me? 110
 I cringe from mingling with the immortals now—
 Oh the torment—never-ending heartbreak!
 But go I shall. A high decree of the Father
 must not come to nothing—whatever he commands."

The radiant queen of sea-nymphs seized a veil,
 blue-black, no robe darker in all the Ocean's depths,
 and launched up and away with wind-swift Iris leading—
 the ground swell round them cleaved and opened wide.
 And striding out on shore they soared to the high sky
 and found farseeing Zeus, and around him all the gods 120
 who live in bliss forever sat in a grand assembly.
 And Thetis took a seat beside the Father,
 a throne Athena yielded. Hera placed in her hand
 a burnished golden cup and said some words of comfort,

and taking a few quick sips, Thetis gave it back . . .
 The father of men and gods began to address them:
 "You have come to Olympus now, immortal Thetis,
 for all your grief—what unforgettable sorrow
 seizes on your heart. I know it well myself.
 Even so, I must tell you why I called you here. 13
 For nine whole days the immortals have been feuding
 over Hector's corpse and Achilles scourge of cities.
 They keep urging the sharp-eyed giant-killer Hermes
 to go and steal the body. But that is not my way.
 I will grant Achilles glory and so safeguard
 your awe and love of me for all the years to come.
 Go at once to the camp, give your son this order:
 tell him the gods are angry with him now
 and I am rising over them all in deathless wrath 14
 that he in heartsick fury still holds Hector's body,
 there by his beaked ships, and will not give him back—
 perhaps in fear of me he'll give him back at once.
 Then, at the same time, I am winging Iris down
 to greathearted Priam, commanding the king
 to ransom his dear son, to go to Achaea's ships,
 bearing gifts to Achilles, gifts to melt his rage."
 So he decreed
 and Thetis with her glistening feet did not resist a moment.
 Down the goddess flashed from the peaks of Mount Olympus,
 made her way to her son's camp, and there he was, 15
 she found him groaning hard, choked with sobs.
 Around him trusted comrades swung to the work,
 preparing breakfast, steadying in their midst
 a large fleecy sheep just slaughtered in the shelter.
 But his noble mother, settling down at his side,
 stroked Achilles gently, whispering his name: "My child—
 how long will you eat your heart out here in tears and torment?
 All wiped from your mind, all thought of food and bed?
 It's a welcome thing to make love with a woman . . .
 You don't have long to live now, well I know:
 already I see them looming up beside you—death 16
 and the strong force of fate. Listen to me,

quickly! I bring you a message sent by Zeus:
 he says the gods are angry with you now
 and he is rising over them all in deathless wrath
 that you in heartsick fury still hold Hector's body,
 here by your beaked ships, and will not give him back.
 O give him back at once—take ransom for the dead!"

The swift runner replied in haste, "So be it.
 The man who brings the ransom can take away the body,
 if Olympian Zeus himself insists in all earnest." 17

While mother and son agreed among the clustered ships,
 trading between each other many winged words,
 Father Zeus sped Iris down to sacred Troy:
 "Quick on your way now, Iris, shear the wind!
 Leave our Olympian stronghold—
 take a message to greathearted Priam down in Troy:
 he must go to Achaea's ships and ransom his dear son,
 bearing gifts to Achilles, gifts to melt his rage.
 But let him go alone, no other Trojan attend him,
 only a herald with him, a seasoned, older one 18
 who can drive the mules and smooth-running wagon
 and bring the hero's body back to sacred Troy,
 the man that brilliant Achilles killed in battle.
 Let him have no fear of death, no dread in his heart,
 such a powerful escort we will send him—the giant-killer
 Hermes will guide him all the way to Achilles' presence.
 And once the god has led him within the fighter's shelter,
 Achilles will not kill him—he'll hold back all the rest:
 Achilles is no madman, no reckless fool, not the one
 to defy the gods' commands. Whoever begs his mercy 19
 he will spare with all the kindness in his heart."

So he decreed
 and Iris ran his message, racing with gale force
 to Priam's halls where cries and mourning met her.
 Sons huddled round their father deep in the courtyard,
 robes drenched with tears, and the old man amidst them,
 buried, beaten down in the cloak that wrapped his body . . .

Smeared on the old man's head and neck the dung lay thick
 that he scraped up in his own hands, groveling in the filth.
 Throughout the house his daughters and sons' wives wailed,
 remembering all the fine brave men who lay dead now, 20
 their lives destroyed at the fighting Argives' hands.
 And Iris, Zeus's crier, standing alongside Priam,
 spoke in a soft voice, but his limbs shook at once—
 "Courage, Dardan Priam, take heart! Nothing to fear.
 No herald of doom, I come on a friendly mission—
 I come with all good will.
 I bring you a message sent by Zeus, a world away
 but he has you in his heart, he pities you now . . .
 Olympian Zeus commands you to ransom royal Hector,
 to bear gifts to Achilles, gifts to melt his rage. 21
 But you must go alone, no other Trojan attend you,
 only a herald with you, a seasoned, older one
 who can drive the mules and smooth-running wagon
 and bring the hero's body back to sacred Troy,
 the man that brilliant Achilles killed in battle.
 But have no fear of death, no dread in your heart,
 such a powerful escort will conduct you—the giant-killer
 Hermes will guide you all the way to Achilles' presence.
 And once the god has led you within the fighter's shelter,
 Achilles will not kill you—he'll hold back all the rest: 22
 Achilles is no madman, no reckless fool, not the one
 to defy the gods' commands. Whoever begs his mercy
 he will spare with all the kindness in his heart!"

And Iris racing the wind went veering off
 and Priam ordered his sons to get a wagon ready,
 a good smooth-running one, to hitch the mules
 and strap a big wicker cradle across its frame.
 Then down he went himself to his treasure-chamber,
 high-ceilinged, paneled, fragrant with cedarwood
 and a wealth of precious objects filled its chests. 23
 He called out to his wife, Hecuba, "Dear woman!
 An Olympian messenger came to me from Zeus—
 I must go to Achaea's ships and ransom our dear son,

bearing gifts to Achilles, gifts to melt his rage.
 Tell me, what should I do? What do *you* think?
 Myself—a terrible longing drives me, heart and soul,
 down to the ships, into the vast Achaeian camp."

But his wife cried out in answer, "No, no—
 where have your senses gone?—that made you famous once,
 both among outland men and those you rule in Troy! 24
 How can you think of going down to the ships, alone,
 and face the glance of the man who killed your sons,
 so many fine brave boys? You have a heart of iron!
 If he gets you in his clutches, sets his eyes on you—
 that savage, treacherous man—he'll show no mercy,
 no respect for your rights!

Come, all we can do now
 is sit in the halls, far from our son, and wail for Hector . . .
 So this, this is the doom that strong Fate spun out,
 our son's life line drawn with his first breath—
 the moment I gave him birth— 25
 to glut the wild dogs, cut off from his parents,
 crushed by the stronger man. Oh would to god
 that I could sink my teeth in his liver, eat him raw!
 That would avenge what he has done to Hector—
 no coward the man Achilles killed—my son stood
 and fought for the men of Troy and their deep-breasted wives
 with never a thought of flight or run for cover!"

But the old and noble Priam answered firmly,
 "I will go. My mind's made up. Don't hold me back.
 And don't go flying off on your own across the halls, 26
 a bird of evil omen—you can't dissuade me now.
 If someone else had commanded me, some mortal man,
 some prophet staring into the smoke, some priest,
 I'd call it a lie and turn my back upon it.
 Not now. I heard her voice with my own ears,
 I looked straight at the goddess, face-to-face.
 So I am going—her message must not come to nothing.
 And if it is my fate to die by the beaked ships

of Achaeans armed in bronze, then die I shall.
Let Achilles cut me down straightway—
once I've caught my son in my arms and wept my fill!"

27

He raised back the carved lids of the chests
 and lifted out twelve robes, handsome, rich brocades,
 twelve cloaks, unlined and light, as many blankets,
 as many big white capes and shirts to go with them.
 He weighed and carried out ten full bars of gold
 and took two burnished tripods, four fine cauldrons
 and last a magnificent cup the Thracians gave him once—
 he'd gone on an embassy and won that priceless treasure—
 but not even *that* did the old man spare in his halls,
 not now, consumed with desire to ransom back his son.
 Crowds of Trojans were mobbing his colonnades—
 he gave them a tongue-lashing, sent them packing:
 "Get out—you good-for-nothings, public disgraces!
 Haven't you got enough to wail about at home
 without coming here to add to all my griefs?
 You think it nothing, the pain that Zeus has sent me?—
 he's destroyed my best son! You'll learn too, in tears—
 easier game you'll be for Argive troops to slaughter,
 now my Hector's dead. But before I have to see
 my city annihilated, laid waste before my eyes—
 oh let me go down to the House of Death!"

28

29

He herded them off with his staff—they fled outside
 before the old man's fury. So he lashed out at his sons,
 cursing the sight of Helenus, Paris, noble Agathon,
 Pammon, Antiphonus, Polites loud with the war cry,
 Deiphobus and Hippothous, even lordly Dius—
 the old man shouted at all nine, rough commands:
 "Get to your work! My vicious sons—my humiliations!
 If only you'd all been killed at the fast ships
 instead of my dear Hector . . .
 But I—dear god, my life so cursed by fate!—
 I fathered hero sons in the wide realm of Troy
 and now, now not a single one is left, I tell you.

3

Mestor the indestructible, Troilus, passionate horseman
 and Hector, a god among men—no son of a mortal man,
 he seemed a deathless god's. But Ares killed them all
 and all he left me are these, these disgraces—liars,
 dancers, heroes only at beating the dancing-rings,
 you plunder your own people for lambs and kids!
 Why don't you get my wagon ready—now, at once?
 Pack all these things aboard! We must be on our way!"

310

Terrified by their father's rough commands
 the sons trundled a mule-wagon out at once,
 a good smooth-running one,
 newly finished, balanced and bolted tight,
 and strapped a big wicker cradle across its frame.
 They lifted off its hook a boxwood yoke for the mules,
 its bulging pommel fitted with rings for guide-reins,
 brought out with the yoke its yoke-strap nine arms long
 and wedged the yoke down firm on the sanded, tapered pole,
 on the front peg, and slipped the yoke-ring onto its pin,
 strapped the pommel with three good twists, both sides,
 then lashed the assembly round and down the shaft
 and under the clamp they made the lashing fast.
 Then the priceless ransom for Hector's body:
 hauling it up from the vaults they piled it high
 on the wagon's well-made cradle, then they yoked the mules—
 stamping their sharp hoofs, trained for heavy loads—
 that the Mysians once gave Priam, princely gifts.
 And last they yoked his team to the king's chariot,
 stallions he bred himself in his own polished stalls.

320

330

No sooner were both men harnessed up beneath the roofs,
 Priam and herald, minds set on the coming journey,
 than Hecuba rushed up to them, gaunt with grief,
 holding a gold cup of mellow wine in her right hand
 so the men might pour libations before they left.
 She stood in front of the horses, crying up at Priam,
 "Here, quickly—pour a libation out to Father Zeus!
 Pray for a safe return from all our mortal enemies,

340

seeing you're dead set on going down to the ships—
 though you go against my will. But if go you must,
 pray, at least, to the great god of the dark storm cloud,
 up there on Ida, gazing down on the whole expanse of Troy!
 Pray for a bird of omen, Zeus's wind-swift messenger,
 the dearest bird in the world to his prophetic heart,
 the strongest thing on wings—clear on the right
 so you can see that sign with your own eyes
 and trust your life to *it* as you venture down
 to Achaea's ships and the fast chariot-teams. 350
 But if farseeing Zeus does *not* send you that sign—
 his own messenger—then I urge you, beg you,
 don't go down to the ships—
 not for all the passion in your heart!"

The old majestic Priam gave his answer:
 "Dear woman, surely I won't resist your urging now.
 It's well to lift our hands and ask great Zeus for mercy."

And the old king motioned a steward standing by
 to pour some clear pure water over his hands,
 and she came forward, bearing a jug and basin. 360
 He rinsed his hands, took the cup from his wife
 and taking a stand amidst the forecourt, prayed,
 pouring the wine to earth and scanning the high skies;
 Priam prayed in his rich resounding voice: "Father Zeus!
 Ruling over us all from Ida, god of greatness, god of glory!
 Grant that Achilles will receive me with kindness, mercy.
 Send me a bird of omen, your own wind-swift messenger,
 the dearest bird in the world to your prophetic heart,
 the strongest thing on wings—clear on the right
 so I can see that sign with my own eyes
 and trust my life to *it* as I venture down
 to Achaea's ships and the fast chariot-teams!" 37

And Zeus in all his wisdom heard that prayer
 and straightaway the Father launched an eagle—
 truest of Zeus's signs that fly the skies—

the dark marauder that mankind calls the Black-wing.
 Broad as the door of a rich man's vaulted treasure-chamber,
 well-fitted with sturdy bars, so broad each wing of the bird
 spread out on either side as it swept in through the city
 flashing clear on the right before the king and queen. 380
 All looked up, overjoyed—the people's spirits lifted.

And the old man, rushing to climb aboard his chariot,
 drove out through the gates and echoing colonnades.
 The mules in the lead hauled out the four-wheeled wagon,
 driven on by seasoned Idaeus. The horses came behind
 as the old man cracked the lash and urged them fast
 throughout the city with all his kinsmen trailing . . .
 weeping their hearts out, as if he went to his death.
 But once the two passed down through crowded streets
 and out into open country, Priam's kin turned back, 390
 his sons and in-laws straggling home to Troy.
 But Zeus who beholds the world could hardly fail
 to see the two men striking out across the plain.
 As he watched the old man he filled with pity
 and quickly summoned Hermes, his own dear son:
 "Hermes—escorting men is your greatest joy,
 you above all the gods,
 and you listen to the wish of those you favor.
 So down you go. Down and conduct King Priam there
 through Achaea's beaked ships, so none will see him,
 none of the Argive fighters recognize him now, 400
 not till he reaches Peleus' royal son."

So he decreed
 and Hermes the giant-killing guide obeyed at once.
 Under his feet he strapped the supple sandals,
 never-dying gold, that wing him over the waves
 and boundless earth, with the speed of gusting winds.
 He seized the wand that enchants the eyes of men
 whenever Hermes wants, or wakes them up from sleep.
 That wand in his grip he flew, the mighty giant-killer
 touching down on Troy and the Hellespont in no time
 and from there he went on foot, for all the world 410

like a young prince, sporting his first beard,
just in the prime and fresh warm pride of youth.

And now,

as soon as the two drove past the great tomb of Ilus
they drew rein at the ford to water mules and team.
A sudden darkness had swept across the earth
and Hermes was all but on them when the herald
looked up, saw him, shouted at once to Priam,
“Danger, my king—think fast! I see a man—
I’m afraid we’ll both be butchered on the spot—
into the chariot, hurry! Run for our lives
or fling ourselves at his knees and beg for mercy!”

420

The old man was stunned, in a swirl of terror,
the hairs stood bristling all over his gnarled body—
he stood there, staring dumbly. Not waiting for welcome
the running god of luck went straight up to Priam,
clasped the old king’s hands and asked him warmly,
“Father—where do you drive these mules and team
through the godsent night while other mortals sleep?
Have you no fear of the Argives breathing hate and fury?
Here are your deadly enemies, camping close at hand.
Now what if one of them saw you, rolling blithely on
through the rushing night with so much tempting treasure—
how would you feel then? You’re not so young yourself,
and the man who attends you here is far too old
to drive off an attacker spoiling for a fight.
But I would never hurt you—and what’s more,
I’d beat off any man who’d do you harm:
you remind me of my dear father, to the life.”

430

And the old and noble Priam said at once,
“Our straits are hard, dear child, as you say.
But a god still holds his hands above me, even me.
Sending such a traveler here to meet me—
what a lucky omen! Look at your build . . .
your handsome face—a wonder. And such good sense—
your parents must be blissful as the gods!”

440

The guide and giant-killer answered quickly,
“You’re right, old man, all straight to the mark.
But come, tell me the truth now, point by point:
this treasure—a king’s ransom—do you send it off
to distant, outland men, to keep it safe for you?
Or now do you all abandon sacred Troy,
all in panic—such was the man who died,
your finest, bravest man . . . your own son
who never failed in a fight against the Argives.”

450

But the old majestic Priam countered quickly,
“Who are *you*, my fine friend?—who are your parents?
How can you speak so well of my doomed son’s fate?”

And the guide and giant-killer answered staunchly,
“You’re testing me, old man—asking of noble Hector.
Ah, how often I watched him battling on the lines
where men win glory, saw the man with my own eyes!
And saw him drive Achaeans against the ships that day
he kept on killing, cutting them down with slashing bronze
while we stood by and marveled—Achilles reined us in:
no fighting for us while he raged on at Agamemnon.
I am Achilles’ aide, you see,
one and the same good warship brought us here.
I am a Myrmidon, and my father is Polyctor,
and a wealthy man he is, about as old as you . . .
He has six sons—I’m the seventh—we all shook lots
and it fell to me to join the armies here at Troy.
I’ve just come up from the ships to scout the plain—
at dawn the fiery-eyed Achaeans fight around the city.
They chafe, sitting in camp, so bent on battle now
the kings of Achaea cannot hold them back.”

460

470

And the old and noble Priam asked at once,
“If you really are the royal Achilles’ aide,
please, tell *me* the whole truth, point by point.
My son—does he still lie by the beached ships,

480

or by now has the great Achilles hacked him limb from limb and served him to his dogs?"

The guide and giant-killer reassured him:
 "So far, old man, no birds or dogs have eaten him. No, there he lies—still there at Achilles' ship, still intact in his shelters.
 This is the twelfth day he's lain there, too, but his body has not decayed, not in the least, nor have the worms begun to gnaw his corpse, the swarms that devour men who fall in battle. True, dawn on fiery dawn he drags him round his beloved comrade's tomb, drags him ruthlessly but he cannot mutilate his body. It's marvelous—go see for yourself how he lies there fresh as dew, the blood washed away, and no sign of corruption. All his wounds sealed shut, wherever they struck . . . and many drove their bronze blades through his body. Such pains the blissful gods are lavishing on your son, dead man though he is—the gods love him dearly!"

45

50

And the old man rejoiced at that, bursting out,
 "O my child, how good it is to give the immortals fit and proper gifts! Now take my son—
 or was he all a dream? Never once in his halls did he forget the gods who hold Olympus, never, so now they remember *him* . . . if only after death. Come, this handsome cup: accept it from me, I beg you! Protect me, escort me now—if the gods will it so—all the way till I reach Achilles' shelter."

51

The guide and giant-killer refused him firmly,
 "You test me again, old man, since I am young, but you will not persuade me, tempting me with a gift behind Achilles' back. I fear the man, I'd die of shame to rob him—just think of the trouble I might suffer later. But I'd escort you with all the kindness in my heart,

all the way till I reached the shining hills of Argos bound in a scudding ship or pacing you on foot—and no marauder on earth, scorning your escort, would dare attack you then."

And the god of luck,
 leaping onto the chariot right behind the team,
 quickly grasped the whip and reins in his hands
 and breathed fresh spirit into the mules and horses.
 As they reached the trench and rampart round the fleet,
 the sentries had just begun to set out supper there
 but the giant-killer plunged them all in sleep . . .
 he spread the gates at once, slid back the bars
 and ushered Priam in with his wagon-load of treasure.
 Now, at last, they approached royal Achilles' shelter,
 the tall, imposing lodge the Myrmidons built their king,
 hewing planks of pine, and roofed it high with thatch,
 gathering thick shaggy reeds from the meadow banks,
 and round it built their king a spacious courtyard
 fenced with close-set stakes. A single pine beam
 held the gates, and it took three men to ram it home,
 three to shoot the immense bolt back and spread the doors—
 three average men. Achilles alone could ram it home himself.
 But the god of luck now spread the gates for the old man,
 drove in the glinting gifts for Peleus' swift son,
 climbed down from behind the team and said to Priam,
 "Old man, look, I am a god come down to you,
 I am immortal Hermes—
 my Father sent me here to be your escort.
 But now I will hasten back. I will not venture
 into Achilles' presence: it would offend us all
 for a mortal man to host an immortal face-to-face.
 But you go in yourself and clasp Achilles' knees,
 implore him by his father, his mother with lovely hair,
 by his own son—so you can stir his heart!"

520

530

540

With that urging
 Hermes went his way to the steep heights of Olympus.
 But Priam swung down to earth from the battle-car
 and leaving Idaeus there to rein in mules and team,

550

the old king went straight up to the lodge
 where Achilles dear to Zeus would always sit.
 Priam found the warrior there inside . . .
 many captains sitting some way off, but two,
 veteran Automedon and the fine fighter Alcimus
 were busy serving him. He had just finished dinner,
 eating, drinking, and the table still stood near.
 The majestic king of Troy slipped past the rest
 and kneeling down beside Achilles, clasped his knees 56
 and kissed his hands, those terrible, man-killing hands
 that had slaughtered Priam's many sons in battle.
 Awesome—as when the grip of madness seizes one
 who murders a man in his own fatherland and flees
 abroad to foreign shores, to a wealthy, noble host,
 and a sense of marvel runs through all who see him—
 so Achilles marveled, beholding majestic Priam.
 His men marveled too, trading startled glances.
 But Priam prayed his heart out to Achilles:
 "Remember your own father, great godlike Achilles— 570
 as old as *I* am, past the threshold of deadly old age!
 No doubt the countrymen round about him plague him now,
 with no one there to defend him, beat away disaster.
 No one—but at least he hears you're still alive
 and his old heart rejoices, hopes rising, day by day,
 to see his beloved son come sailing home from Troy.
 But I—dear god, my life so cursed by fate . . .
 I fathered hero sons in the wide realm of Troy
 and now not a single one is left, I tell you. . . .
 Fifty sons I had when the sons of Achaea came, 580
 nineteen born to me from a single mother's womb
 and the rest by other women in the palace. Many,
 most of them violent Ares cut the knees from under.
 But one, one was left me, to guard my walls, my people—
 the one you killed the other day, defending his fatherland,
 my Hector! It's all for him I've come to the ships now,
 to win him back from you—I bring a priceless ransom.
 Revere the gods, Achilles! Pity me in my own right,
 remember your own father! I deserve more pity . . .

I have endured what no one on earth has ever done before— 590
 I put to my lips the hands of the man who killed my son.'

Those words stirred within Achilles a deep desire
 to grieve for his own father. Taking the old man's hand
 he gently moved him back. And overpowered by memory
 both men gave way to grief. Priam wept freely
 for man-killing Hector, throbbing, crouching
 before Achilles' feet as Achilles wept himself,
 now for his father, now for Patroclus once again,
 and their sobbing rose and fell throughout the house.
 Then, when brilliant Achilles had had his fill of tears 600
 and the longing for it had left his mind and body,
 he rose from his seat, raised the old man by the hand
 and filled with pity now for his gray head and gray beard,
 he spoke out winging words, flying straight to the heart:
 "Poor man, how much you've borne—pain to break the spirit!
 What daring brought you down to the ships, all alone,
 to face the glance of the man who killed your sons,
 so many fine brave boys? You have a heart of iron.
 Come, please, sit down on this chair here . . .
 Let us put our griefs to rest in our own hearts, 610
 rake them up no more, raw as we are with mourning.
 What good's to be won from tears that chill the spirit?
 So the immortals spun our lives that we, we wretched men
 live on to bear such torments—the gods live free of sorrows.
 There are two great jars that stand on the floor of Zeus's halls
 and hold his gifts, our miseries one, the other blessings.
 When Zeus who loves the lightning mixes gifts for a man,
 now he meets with misfortune, now good times in turn.
 When Zeus dispenses gifts from the jar of sorrows only,
 he makes a man an outcast—brutal, ravenous hunger 620
 drives him down the face of the shining earth,
 stalking far and wide, cursed by gods and men. . . .
 So with my father, Peleus. What glittering gifts
 the gods rained down from the day that he was born!
 He excelled all men in wealth and pride of place,
 he lorded the Myrmidons, and mortal that he was,

they gave the man an immortal goddess for a wife.
 Yes, but even on him the Father piled hardships,
 no powerful race of princes born in his royal halls,
 only a single son he fathered, doomed at birth,
 cut off in the spring of life—
 and I, I give the man no care as he grows old
 since here I sit in Troy, far from my fatherland,
 a grief to you, a grief to all your children . . .
 And you too, old man, we hear you prospered once:
 as far as Lesbos, Macar's kingdom, bounds to seaward,
 Phrygia east and upland, the Hellespont vast and north—
 that entire realm, they say, you lorded over once,
 you excelled all men, old king, in sons and wealth.
 But then the gods of heaven brought this agony on you—
 ceaseless battles round your walls, your armies slaughtered.
 You must bear up now. Enough of endless tears,
 the pain that breaks the spirit.
 Grief for your son will do no good at all.
 You will never bring him back to life—
 sooner you must suffer something worse."

630

640

But the old and noble Priam protested strongly:
 "Don't make me sit on a chair, Achilles, Prince,
 not while Hector lies uncared-for in your camp!
 Give him back to me, now, no more delay—
 I must see my son with my own eyes.
 Accept the ransom I bring you, a king's ransom!
 Enjoy it, all of it—return to your own native land,
 safe and sound . . . since now you've spared my life."

65

A dark glance—and the headstrong runner answered,
 "No more, old man, don't tempt my wrath, not now!
 My own mind's made up to give you back your son.
 A messenger brought me word from Zeus—my mother,
 Thetis who bore me, the Old Man of the Sea's daughter.
 And what's more, I can see through you, Priam—
 no hiding the fact from me: one of the gods

6

has led you down to Achaea's fast ships.
 No man alive, not even a rugged young fighter,
 would dare to venture into our camp. Never—
 how could he slip past the sentries unchallenged?
 Or shoot back the bolt of my gates with so much ease?
 So don't anger me now. Don't stir my raging heart still more.
 Or under my own roof I may not spare your life, old man—
 suppliant that you are—may break the laws of Zeus!"

The old man was terrified. He obeyed the order.
 But Achilles bounded out of doors like a lion—
 not alone but flanked by his two aides-in-arms,
 veteran Automedon and Alcimus, steady comrades,
 Achilles' favorites next to the dead Patroclus.
 They loosed from harness the horses and the mules,
 they led the herald in, the old king's crier,
 and sat him down on a bench. From the polished wagon
 they lifted the priceless ransom brought for Hector's corpse
 but they left behind two capes and a finely-woven shirt
 to shroud the body well when Priam bore him home.

670

680

Then Achilles called the serving-women out:
 "Bathe and anoint the body—
 bear it aside first. Priam must not see his son."
 He feared that, overwhelmed by the sight of Hector,
 wild with grief, Priam might let his anger flare
 and Achilles might fly into fresh rage himself,
 cut the old man down and break the laws of Zeus.
 So when the maids had bathed and anointed the body
 sleek with olive oil and wrapped it round and round
 in a braided battle-shirt and handsome battle-cape,
 then Achilles lifted Hector up in his own arms
 and laid him down on a bier, and comrades helped him
 raise the bier and body onto the sturdy wagon . . .
 Then with a groan he called his dear friend by name:
 "Feel no anger at me, Patroclus, if you learn—
 even there in the House of Death—I let his father
 have Prince Hector back. He gave me worthy ransom
 and you shall have your share from me, as always,

690

your fitting, lordly share.”

So he vowed

and brilliant Achilles strode back to his shelter,
 sat down on the well-carved chair that he had left,
 at the far wall of the room, leaned toward Priam
 and firmly spoke the words the king had come to hear:
 “Your son is now set free, old man, as you requested.
 Hector lies in state. With the first light of day
 you will see for yourself as you convey him home.
 Now, at last, let us turn our thoughts to supper.
 Even Niobe with her lustrous hair remembered food,
 though she saw a dozen children killed in her own halls,
 six daughters and six sons in the pride and prime of youth
 True, lord Apollo killed the sons with his silver bow
 and Artemis showering arrows killed the daughters.
 Both gods were enraged at Niobe. Time and again
 she placed herself on a par with their own mother,
 Leto in her immortal beauty—how she insulted Leto:
 ‘All you have borne is two, but I have borne so many!’
 So, two as they were, they slaughtered all her children.
 Nine days they lay in their blood, no one to bury them—
 Cronus’ son had turned the people into stone . . .
 then on the tenth the gods of heaven interred them.
 And Niobe, gaunt, worn to the bone with weeping,
 turned her thoughts to food. And now, somewhere,
 lost on the crags, on the lonely mountain slopes,
 on Sipylus where, they say, the nymphs who live forever,
 dancing along the Achelous River run to beds of rest—
 there, struck into stone, Niobe still broods
 on the spate of griefs the gods poured out to her.

70

7

7

So come—we too, old king, must think of food.
 Later you can mourn your beloved son once more,
 when you bear him home to Troy, and you’ll weep many tears.”

Never pausing, the swift runner sprang to his feet
 and slaughtered a white sheep as comrades moved in
 to skin the carcass quickly, dress the quarters well.

Expertly they cut the meat in pieces, pierced them with spits,
 roasted them to a turn and pulled them off the fire.
 Automedon brought the bread, set it out on the board
 in ample wicker baskets. Achilles served the meat.
 They reached out for the good things that lay at hand
 and when they had put aside desire for food and drink,
 Priam the son of Dardanus gazed at Achilles, marveling
 now at the man’s beauty, his magnificent build—
 face-to-face he seemed a deathless god . . .
 and Achilles gazed and marveled at Dardan Priam,
 beholding his noble looks, listening to his words.
 But once they’d had their fill of gazing at each other,
 the old majestic Priam broke the silence first:
 “Put me to bed quickly, Achilles, Prince.
 Time to rest, to enjoy the sweet relief of sleep.
 Not once have my eyes closed shut beneath my lids
 from the day my son went down beneath your hands . . .
 day and night I groan, brooding over the countless griefs,
 groveling in the dung that fills my walled-in court.
 But now, at long last, I have tasted food again
 and let some glistening wine go down my throat.
 Before this hour I had tasted nothing.”

740

750

He shook his head

as Achilles briskly told his men and serving-women
 to make beds in the porch’s shelter, to lay down
 some heavy purple throws for the beds themselves
 and over them spread blankets and thick woolly robes,
 a warm covering laid on top. Torches held in hand,
 they went from the hall and fell to work at once
 and in no time two good beds were spread and made.
 Then Achilles nodded to Priam, leading the king on
 with brusque advice: “Sleep outside, old friend,
 in case some Achaean captain comes to visit.
 They keep on coming now, huddling beside me,
 making plans for battle—it’s their duty.
 But if one saw you here in the rushing dark night
 he’d tell Agamemnon straightaway, our good commander.
 Then you’d have real delay in ransoming the body.”

760

770

One more point. Tell me, be precise about it—
how many days do you need to bury Prince Hector?
I will hold back myself
and keep the Argive armies back that long.”

And the old and noble Priam answered slowly,
“If you truly want me to give Prince Hector burial,
full, royal honors, you’d show me a great kindness,
Achilles, if you would do exactly as I say.
You know how crammed we are inside our city,
how far it is to the hills to haul in timber,
and our Trojans are afraid to make the journey.
Well, nine days we should mourn him in our halls,
on the tenth we’d bury Hector, hold the public feast,
on the eleventh build the barrow high above his body—
on the twelfth we’d fight again . . . if fight we must.”

78

The swift runner Achilles reassured him quickly:
“All will be done, old Priam, as you command.
I will hold our attack as long as you require.”

With that he clasped the old king by the wrist,
by the right hand, to free his heart from fear.
Then Priam and herald, minds set on the journey home,
bedded down for the night within the porch’s shelter.
And deep in his sturdy well-built lodge Achilles slept
with Briseis in all her beauty sleeping by his side.

790

Now the great array of gods and chariot-driving men
slept all night long, overcome by gentle sleep.
But sleep could never hold the running Escort—
Hermes kept on turning it over in his mind . . .
how could he convoy Priam clear of the ships,
unseen by devoted guards who held the gates?
Hovering at his head the Escort rose and spoke:
“Not a care in the world, old man? Look at you,
how you sleep in the midst of men who’d kill you—
and just because Achilles spared your life. Now, yes,

800

you’ve ransomed your dear son—for a king’s ransom.
But wouldn’t the sons you left behind be forced
to pay three times as much for *you* alive?
What if Atrides Agamemnon learns you’re here—
what if the whole Achaean army learns you’re here?”

The old king woke in terror, roused the herald.
Hermes harnessed the mules and team for both men,
drove them fast through the camp and no one saw them.

810

Once they reached the ford where the river runs clear,
the strong, whirling Xanthus sprung of immortal Zeus,
Hermes went his way to the steep heights of Olympus
as Dawn flung out her golden robe across the earth,
and the two men, weeping, groaning, drove the team
toward Troy and the mules brought on the body.
No one saw them at first, neither man nor woman,
none before Cassandra, golden as goddess Aphrodite.
She had climbed to Pergamus heights and from that point
she saw her beloved father swaying tall in the chariot,
flanked by the herald, whose cry could rouse the city.
And Cassandra saw *him* too . . .
drawn by the mules and stretched out on his bier.
She screamed and her scream rang out through all Troy:
“Come, look down, you men of Troy, you Trojan women!
Behold Hector now—if you ever once rejoiced
to see him striding home, home alive from battle!
He was the greatest joy of Troy and all our people!”

820

830

Her cries plunged Troy into uncontrollable grief
and not a man or woman was left inside the walls.
They streamed out at the gates to meet Priam
bringing in the body of the dead. Hector—
his loving wife and noble mother were first
to fling themselves on the wagon rolling on,
the first to tear their hair, embrace his head
and a wailing throng of people milled around them.
And now, all day long till the setting sun went down

they would have wept for Hector there before the gates
 if the old man, steering the car, had not commanded,
 "Let me through with the mules! Soon, in a moment,
 you can have your fill of tears—once I've brought him home."

840

So he called and the crowds fell back on either side,
 making way for the wagon. Once they had borne him
 into the famous halls, they laid his body down
 on his large carved bed and set beside him singers
 to lead off the laments, and their voices rose in grief—
 they lifted the dirge high as the women wailed in answer.
 And white-armed Andromache led their songs of sorrow,
 cradling the head of Hector, man-killing Hector
 gently in her arms: "O my husband . . .
 cut off from life so young! You leave me a widow,
 lost in the royal halls—and the boy only a baby,
 the son we bore together, you and I so doomed.
 I cannot think he will ever come to manhood.
 Long before *that* the city will be sacked,
 plundered top to bottom! Because you are dead,
 her great guardian, you who always defended Troy,
 who kept her loyal wives and helpless children safe,
 all who will soon be carried off in the hollow ships
 and I with them—

850

86

87

And you, my child, will follow me
 to labor, somewhere, at harsh, degrading work,
 slaving under some heartless master's eye—that,
 or some Achaean marauder will seize you by the arm
 and hurl you headlong down from the ramparts—horrible death—
 enraged at you because Hector once cut down his brother,
 his father or his son, yes, hundreds of armed Achaeans
 gnawed the dust of the world, crushed by Hector's hands!
 Your father, remember, was no man of mercy . . .
 not in the horror of battle, and that is why
 the whole city of Troy mourns you now, my Hector—
 you've brought your parents accursed tears and grief
 but to me most of all you've left the horror, the heartbreak!
 For you never died in bed and stretched your arms to me

or said some last word from the heart I can remember,
 always, weeping for you through all my nights and days

Her voice rang out in tears and the women wailed in answer
 and Hecuba led them now in a throbbing chant of sorrow:
 "Hector, dearest to me by far of all my sons . . .
 and dear to the gods while we still shared this life—
 and they cared about you still, I see, even after death.
 Many the sons I had whom the swift runner Achilles
 caught and shipped on the barren salt sea as slaves
 to Samos, to Imbros, to Lemnos shrouded deep in mist!
 But you, once he slashed away your life with his brazen spear
 he dragged you time and again around his comrade's tomb,
 Patroclus whom you killed—not that he brought Patroclus
 back to life by that. But I have you with me now . . .
 fresh as the morning dew you lie in the royal halls
 like one whom Apollo, lord of the silver bow,
 has approached and shot to death with gentle shafts."

880

890

Her voice rang out in tears and an endless wail rose up
 and Helen, the third in turn, led their songs of sorrow:
 "Hector! Dearest to me of all my husband's brothers—
 my husband, Paris, magnificent as a god . . .
 he was the one who brought me here to Troy—
 Oh how I wish I'd died before that day!
 But this, now, is the twentieth year for me
 since I sailed here and forsook my own native land,
 yet never once did I hear from *you* a taunt, an insult.
 But if someone else in the royal halls would curse me,
 one of your brothers or sisters or brothers' wives
 trailing their long robes, even your own mother—
 not your father, always kind as my own father—
 why, you'd restrain them with words, Hector,
 you'd win them to my side . . .
 you with your gentle temper, all your gentle words.
 And so in the same breath I mourn for you and me,
 my doom-struck, harrowed heart! Now there is no one left

900

910

in the wide realm of Troy, no friend to treat me kindly—
all the countrymen cringe from me in loathing!

Her voice rang out in tears and vast throngs wailed
and old King Priam rose and gave his people orders:
“Now, you men of Troy, haul timber into the city!
Have no fear of an Argive ambush packed with danger—
Achilles vowed, when he sent me home from the black ships,
not to do us harm till the twelfth dawn arrives.”

At his command they harnessed oxen and mules to wagons,
they assembled before the city walls with all good speed 9:
and for nine days hauled in a boundless store of timber.
But when the tenth Dawn brought light to the mortal world
they carried gallant Hector forth, streaming tears,
and they placed his corpse aloft the pyre’s crest,
flung a torch and set it all aflame.

At last,
when young Dawn with her rose-red fingers shone once more,
the people massed around illustrious Hector’s pyre . . .
And once they’d gathered, crowding the meeting grounds,
they first put out the fires with glistening wine,
wherever the flames still burned in all their fury. 93
Then they collected the white bones of Hector—
all his brothers, his friends-in-arms, mourning,
and warm tears came streaming down their cheeks.
They placed the bones they found in a golden chest,
shrouding them round and round in soft purple cloths.
They quickly lowered the chest in a deep, hollow grave
and over it piled a cope of huge stones closely set,
then hastily heaped a barrow, posted lookouts all around
for fear the Achaean combat troops would launch their attack
before the time agreed. And once they’d heaped the mound 94
they turned back home to Troy, and gathering once again
they shared a splendid funeral feast in Hector’s honor,
held in the house of Priam, king by will of Zeus.

And so the Trojans buried Hector breaker of horses.

H O M E R

PENGUIN BOOKS



The
Iliad

TRANSLATED BY
Robert Fagles

INTRODUCTION AND
NOTES BY
BERNARD KNOX