

so all might die a pitiful, ghastly death . . .
they kicked up heels for a little—not for long.

Melanthius?

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They hauled him out through the doorway, into the court,
lopped his nose and ears with a ruthless knife,
tore his genitals out for the dogs to eat raw
and in manic fury hacked off hands and feet.

Then,

once they'd washed their own hands and feet,
they went inside again to join Odysseus.
Their work was done with now.
But the king turned to devoted Eurycleia, saying,
"Bring sulfur, nurse, to scour all this pollution—
bring me fire too, so I can fumigate the house.
And call Penelope here with all her women—
tell all the maids to come back in at once."

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"Well said, my boy," his old nurse replied,
"right to the point. But wait,
let me fetch you a shirt and cloak to wrap you.
No more dawdling round the palace, nothing but rags
to cover those broad shoulders—it's a scandal!"

"Fire first," the good soldier answered.
"Light me a fire to purify this house."

The devoted nurse snapped to his command,
brought her master fire and brimstone. Odysseus
purged his palace, halls and court, with cleansing fumes.

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Then back through the royal house the old nurse went
to tell the women the news and bring them in at once.
They came crowding out of their quarters, torch in hand,
flung their arms around Odysseus, hugged him, home at last,
and kissed his head and shoulders, seized his hands, and he,
overcome by a lovely longing, broke down and wept . . .
deep in his heart he knew them one and all.



The Great Rooted Bed

Up to the rooms the old nurse clambered, chuckling all the way,
to tell the queen her husband was here now, home at last.
Her knees bustling, feet shuffling over each other,
till hovering at her mistress' head she spoke:
"Penelope—child—wake up and see for yourself,
with your own eyes, all you dreamed of, all your days!
He's here—Odysseus—he's come home, at long last!
He's killed the suitors, swaggering young brutes
who plagued his house, wolfed his cattle down,
rode roughshod over his son!"

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"Dear old nurse," wary Penelope replied,
"the gods have made you mad. They have that power,
putting lunacy into the clearest head around

or setting a half-wit on the path to sense.
 They've unhinged you, and you were once so sane.
 Why do you mock me?—haven't I wept enough?—
 telling such wild stories, interrupting my sleep,
 sweet sleep that held me, sealed my eyes just now.
 Not once have I slept so soundly since the day
 Odysseus sailed away to see that cursed city . . .
Destroy, I call it—I hate to say its name!
 Now down you go. Back to your own quarters.
 If any other woman of mine had come to me,
 rousing me out of sleep with such a tale,
 I'd have her bundled back to her room in pain.
 It's only your old gray head that spares you that!"

"Never"—the fond old nurse kept pressing on—
 "dear child, I'd never mock you! No, it's all true,
 he's here—Odysseus—he's come home, just as I tell you!
 He's the stranger they all manhandled in the hall.
 Telemachus knew he was here, for days and days,
 but he knew enough to hide his father's plans
 so *he* could pay those vipers back in kind!"

Penelope's heart burst in joy, she leapt from bed,
 her eyes streaming tears, she hugged the old nurse
 and cried out with an eager, winging word,
 "Please, dear one, give me the whole story.
 If he's really home again, just as you tell me,
 how did he get those shameless suitors in his clutches?—
 single-handed, braving an army always camped inside."

"I have no idea," the devoted nurse replied.
 "I didn't see it, I didn't ask—all I heard
 was the choking groans of men cut down in blood.
 We crouched in terror—a dark nook of our quarters—
 all of us locked tight behind those snug doors
 till your boy Telemachus came and called me out—
 his father rushed him there to do just that. And then
 I found Odysseus in the thick of slaughtered corpses;

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there he stood and all around him, over the beaten floor,
 the bodies sprawled in heaps, lying one on another . . .
 How it would have thrilled your heart to see him—
 splattered with bloody filth, a lion with his kill!
 And now they're all stacked at the courtyard gates—
 he's lit a roaring fire,
 he's purifying the house with cleansing fumes
 and he's sent me here to bring you back to him.
 Follow me down! So now, after all the years of grief,
 you two can embark, loving hearts, along the road to joy.
 Look, your dreams, put off so long, come true at last—
 he's back alive, home at his hearth, and found you,
 found his son still here. And all those suitors
 who did him wrong, he's paid them back, he has,
 right in his own house!"

"Hush, dear woman,"
 guarded Penelope cautioned her at once.
 "Don't laugh, don't cry in triumph—not yet.
 You know how welcome the sight of him would be
 to all in the house, and to me most of all
 and the son we bore together.
 But the story can't be true, not as you tell it,
 no, it must be a god who's killed our brazen friends—
 up in arms at their outrage, heartbreaking crimes.
 They'd no regard for any man on earth—
 good or bad—who chanced to come their way. So,
 thanks to their reckless work they die their deaths.
 Odysseus? Far from Achaea now, he's lost all hope
 of coming home . . . he's lost and gone himself."

"Child," the devoted old nurse protested,
 "what nonsense you let slip through your teeth.
 Here's your husband, warming his hands at his own hearth,
 here—and you, you say he'll never come home again,
 always the soul of trust! All right, this too—
 I'll give you a sign, a proof that's plain as day.
 That scar, made years ago by a boar's white tusk—
 I spotted the scar myself, when I washed his feet,

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and I tried to tell you, ah, but he, the crafty rascal,
clamped his hand on my mouth—I couldn't say a word.
Follow me down now. I'll stake my life on it:
if I am lying to *you*—
kill me with a thousand knives of pain!"

"Dear old nurse," composed Penelope responded,
"deep as you are, my friend, you'll find it hard
to plumb the plans of the everlasting gods.
All the same, let's go and join my son
so I can see the suitors lying dead
and see . . . the one who killed them."

With that thought

Penelope started down from her lofty room, her heart
in turmoil, torn . . . should she keep her distance,
probe her husband? Or rush up to the man at once
and kiss his head and cling to both his hands?
As soon as she stepped across the stone threshold,
slipping in, she took a seat at the closest wall
and radiant in the firelight, faced Odysseus now.
There he sat, leaning against the great central column,
eyes fixed on the ground, waiting, poised for whatever words
his hardy wife might say when she caught sight of him.
A long while she sat in silence . . . numbing wonder
filled her heart as her eyes explored his face.
One moment he seemed . . . Odysseus, to the life—
the next, no, he was not the man she knew,
a huddled mass of rags was all she saw.

"Oh mother," Telemachus reproached her,
"cruel mother, you with your hard heart!
Why do you spurn my father so—why don't you
sit beside him, engage him, ask him questions?
What other wife could have a spirit so unbending?
Holding back from her husband, home at last for *her*
after bearing twenty years of brutal struggle—
your heart was always harder than a rock!"

"My child,"

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Penelope, well-aware, explained, "I'm stunned with wonder,
powerless. Cannot speak to him, ask him questions,
look him in the eyes . . . But if he is truly
Odysseus, home at last, make no mistake:
we two will know each other, even better—
we two have secret signs,
known to us both but hidden from the world."

Odysseus, long-enduring, broke into a smile
and turned to his son with pointed, winging words:
"Leave your mother here in the hall to test me
as she will. She soon will know me better.
Now because I am filthy, wear such grimy rags,
she spurns me—your mother still can't bring herself
to believe I am her husband.

But you and I,
put heads together. What's our best defense?
When someone kills a lone man in the realm
who leaves behind him no great band of avengers,
still the killer flees, goodbye to kin and country.
But *we* brought down the best of the island's princes,
the pillars of Ithaca. Weigh it well, I urge you."

"Look to it all yourself now, father," his son
deferred at once. "You are the best on earth,
they say, when it comes to mapping tactics.
No one, no mortal man, can touch you there.
But we're behind you, hearts intent on battle,
nor do I think you'll find us short on courage,
long as our strength will last."

"Then here's our plan,"
the master of tactics said. "I think it's best.
First go and wash, and pull fresh tunics on
and tell the maids in the hall to dress well too.
And let the inspired bard take up his ringing lyre
and lead off for us all a dance so full of heart
that whoever hears the strains outside the gates—
a passerby on the road, a neighbor round about—

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will think it's a wedding-feast that's under way.
No news of the suitors' death must spread through town
till we have slipped away to our own estates,
our orchard green with trees. There we'll see
what winning strategy Zeus will hand us then."

They hung on his words and moved to orders smartly.
First they washed and pulled fresh tunics on,
the women arrayed themselves—the inspired bard
struck up his resounding lyre and stirred in all
a desire for dance and song, the lovely lilting beat,
till the great house echoed round to the measured tread
of dancing men in motion, women sashed and lithe.
And whoever heard the strains outside would say,
"A miracle—someone's married the queen at last!"

"One of her hundred suitors."

"That callous woman,
too faithless to keep her lord and master's house
to the bitter end—"

"Till he came sailing home."

So they'd say, blind to what had happened:
the great-hearted Odysseus was home again at last.
The maid Eurynome bathed him, rubbed him down with oil
and drew around him a royal cape and choice tunic too.
And Athena crowned the man with beauty, head to foot,
made him taller to all eyes, his build more massive,
yes, and down from his brow the great goddess
ran his curls like thick hyacinth clusters
full of blooms. As a master craftsman washes
gold over beaten silver—a man the god of fire
and Queen Athena trained in every fine technique—
and finishes off his latest effort, handsome work . . .
so she lavished splendor over his head and shoulders now.
He stepped from his bath, glistening like a god,
and back he went to the seat that he had left
and facing his wife, declared,

"Strange woman! So hard—the gods of Olympus
made you harder than any other woman in the world!
What other wife could have a spirit so unbending?
Holding back from her husband, home at last for *her*
after bearing twenty years of brutal struggle.
Come, nurse, make me a bed, I'll sleep alone.
She has a heart of iron in her breast."

"Strange man,"

wary Penelope said. "I'm not so proud, so scornful,
nor am I overwhelmed by your quick change . . .
You look—how well I know—the way he looked,
setting sail from Ithaca years ago
aboard the long-oared ship.

Come, Eurycleia,
move the sturdy bedstead out of our bridal chamber—
that room the master built with his own hands.
Take it out now, sturdy bed that it is,
and spread it deep with fleece,
blankets and lustrous throws to keep him warm."

Putting her husband to the proof—but Odysseus
blazed up in fury, lashing out at his loyal wife:
"Woman—your words, they cut me to the core!
Who could move my bed? Impossible task,
even for some skilled craftsman—unless a god
came down in person, quick to lend a hand,
lifted it out with ease and moved it elsewhere.
Not a man on earth, not even at peak strength,
would find it easy to prise it up and shift it, no,
a great sign, a hallmark lies in its construction.
I know, I built it myself—no one else . . .
There was a branching olive-tree inside our court,
grown to its full prime, the bole like a column, thickset.
Around it I built my bedroom, finished off the walls
with good tight stonework, roofed it over soundly
and added doors, hung well and snugly wedged.
Then I lopped the leafy crown of the olive,
clean-cutting the stump bare from roots up,

planing it round with a bronze smoothing-adze—
 I had the skill—I shaped it plumb to the line to make
 my bedpost, bored the holes it needed with an auger.
 Working from there I built my bed, start to finish,
 I gave it ivory inlays, gold and silver fittings,
 wove the straps across it, oxhide gleaming red.
 There's our secret sign, I tell you, our life story!
 Does the bed, my lady, still stand planted firm?—
 I don't know—or has someone chopped away
 that olive-trunk and hauled our bedstead off?"

Living proof— 230

Penelope felt her knees go slack, her heart surrender,
 recognizing the strong clear signs Odysseus offered.
 She dissolved in tears, rushed to Odysseus, flung her arms
 around his neck and kissed his head and cried out,
 "Odysseus—don't flare up at me now, not you,
 always the most understanding man alive!
 The gods, it was the gods who sent us sorrow—
 they grudged us both a life in each other's arms
 from the heady zest of youth to the stoop of old age.
 But don't fault me, angry with me now because I failed,
 at the first glimpse, to greet you, hold you, so . . .
 In my heart of hearts I always cringed with fear
 some fraud might come, beguile me with his talk;
 the world is full of the sort,
 cunning ones who plot their own dark ends.
 Remember Helen of Argos, Zeus's daughter—
 would *she* have sported so in a stranger's bed
 if she had dreamed that Achaea's sons were doomed
 to fight and die to bring her home again?
 Some god spurred her to do her shameless work.
 Not till then did her mind conceive that madness,
 blinding madness that caused her anguish, ours as well.
 But now, since you have revealed such overwhelming proof—
 the secret sign of our bed, which no one's ever seen
 but you and I and a single handmaid, Actoris,
 the servant my father gave me when I came,

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who kept the doors of our room you built so well . . .
 you've conquered my heart, my hard heart, at last!"

The more she spoke, the more a deep desire for tears
 welled up inside his breast—he wept as he held the wife
 he loved, the soul of loyalty, in his arms at last. 260
 Joy, warm as the joy that shipwrecked sailors feel
 when they catch sight of land—Poseidon has struck
 their well-rigged ship on the open sea with gale winds
 and crushing walls of waves, and only a few escape, swimming,
 struggling out of the frothing surf to reach the shore,
 their bodies crusted with salt but buoyed up with joy
 as they plant their feet on solid ground again,
 spared a deadly fate. So joyous now to her
 the sight of her husband, vivid in her gaze, 270
 that her white arms, embracing his neck
 would never for a moment let him go . . .
 Dawn with her rose-red fingers might have shone
 upon their tears, if with her glinting eyes
 Athena had not thought of one more thing.
 She held back the night, and night lingered long
 at the western edge of the earth, while in the east
 she reined in Dawn of the golden throne at Ocean's banks,
 commanding her not to yoke the windswift team that brings men light,
 Blaze and Aurora, the young colts that race the Morning on. 280
 Yet now Odysseus, seasoned veteran, said to his wife,
 "Dear woman . . . we have still not reached the end
 of all our trials. One more labor lies in store—
 boundless, laden with danger, great and long,
 and I must brave it out from start to finish.
 So the ghost of Tiresias prophesied to me,
 the day that I went down to the House of Death
 to learn our best route home, my comrades' and my own.
 But come, let's go to bed, dear woman—at long last
 delight in sleep, delight in each other, come!" 290

"If it's bed you want," reserved Penelope replied,

"it's bed you'll have, whenever the spirit moves,
now that the gods have brought you home again
to native land, your grand and gracious house.
But since you've alluded to it,
since a god has put it in your mind,
please, tell me about this trial still to come.
I'm bound to learn of it later, I am sure—
what's the harm if I hear of it tonight?"

"Still so strange,"

Odysseus, the old master of stories, answered.
"Why again, why force me to tell you all?
Well, tell I shall. I'll hide nothing now.
But little joy it will bring you, I'm afraid,
as little joy for me.

The prophet said
that I must rove through towns on towns of men,
that I must carry a well-planed oar until
I come to a people who know nothing of the sea,
whose food is never seasoned with salt, strangers all
to ships with their crimson prows and long slim oars,
wings that make ships fly. And here is my sign,
he told me, clear, so clear I cannot miss it,
and I will share it with you now . . .
When another traveler falls in with me and calls
that weight across my shoulder a fan to winnow grain,
then, he told me, I must plant my oar in the earth
and sacrifice fine beasts to the lord god of the sea,
Poseidon—a ram, a bull and a ramping wild boar—
then journey home and render noble offerings up
to the deathless gods who rule the vaulting skies,
to all the gods in order.
And at last my own death will steal upon me . . .
a gentle, painless death, far from the sea it comes
to take me down, borne down with the years in ripe old age
with all my people here in blessed peace around me.
All this, the prophet said, will come to pass."

"And so," Penelope said, in her great wisdom,

"if the gods will really grant a happier old age,
there's hope that we'll escape our trials at last."

So husband and wife confided in each other,
while nurse and Eurynome, under the flaring brands,
were making up the bed with coverings deep and soft.
And working briskly, soon as they'd made it snug,
back to her room the old nurse went to sleep
as Eurynome, their attendant, torch in hand,
lighted the royal couple's way to bed and,
leading them to their chamber, slipped away.
Rejoicing in each other, they returned to their bed,
the old familiar place they loved so well.

Now Telemachus, the cowherd and the swineherd
rested their dancing feet and had the women do the same,
and across the shadowed hall the men lay down to sleep.

But the royal couple, once they'd reveled in all
the longed-for joys of love, reveled in each other's stories,
the radiant woman telling of all she'd borne at home,
watching them there, the infernal crowd of suitors
slaughtering herds of cattle and good fat sheep—
while keen to win her hand—
draining the broached vats dry of vintage wine.
And great Odysseus told his wife of all the pains
he had dealt out to other men and all the hardships
he'd endured himself—his story first to last—
and she listened on, enchanted . . .
Sleep never sealed her eyes till all was told.

He launched in with how he fought the Cicones down,
then how he came to the Lotus-eaters' lush green land.
Then all the crimes of the Cyclops and how he paid him back
for the gallant men the monster ate without a qualm—
then how he visited Aeolus, who gave him a hero's welcome
then he sent him off, but the homeward run was not his fate,
not yet—some sudden squalls snatched him away once more

and drove him over the swarming sea, groaning in despair.
 Then how he moored at Telepylus, where Laestrygonians
 wrecked his fleet and killed his men-at-arms.
 He told her of Circe's cunning magic wiles
 and how he voyaged down in his long benched ship
 to the moldering House of Death, to consult Tiresias,
 ghostly seer of Thebes, and he saw old comrades there
 and he saw his mother, who bore and reared him as a child.
 He told how he caught the Sirens' voices throbbing in the wind
 and how he had scudded past the Clashing Rocks, past grim Charybdis,
 past Scylla—whom no rover had ever coasted by, home free—
 and how his shipmates slaughtered the cattle of the Sun
 and Zeus the king of thunder split his racing ship
 with a reeking bolt and killed his hardy comrades,
 all his fighting men at a stroke, but he alone
 escaped their death at sea. He told how he reached
 Ogygia's shores and the nymph Calypso held him back,
 deep in her arching caverns, craving him for a husband—
 cherished him, vowed to make him immortal, ageless, all his days,
 yes, but she never won the heart inside him, never . . . 380
 then how he reached the Phaeacians—heavy sailing there—
 who with all their hearts had prized him like a god
 and sent him off in a ship to his own beloved land,
 giving him bronze and hoards of gold and robes . . .
 and that was the last he told her, just as sleep
 overcame him . . . sleep loosing his limbs,
 slipping the toils of anguish from his mind.

Athena, her eyes afire, had fresh plans.
 Once she thought he'd had his heart's content
 of love and sleep at his wife's side, straightaway 390
 she roused young Dawn from Ocean's banks to her golden throne
 to bring men light and roused Odysseus too, who rose
 from his soft bed and advised his wife in parting,
 "Dear woman, we both have had our fill of trials.
 You in our house, weeping over my journey home,
 fraught with storms and torment, true, and I,
 pinned down in pain by Zeus and other gods,

for all my desire, blocked from reaching home.
 But now that we've arrived at our bed together—
 the reunion that we yearned for all those years— 400
 look after the things still left me in our house.
 But as for the flocks those brazen suitors plundered,
 much I'll recoup myself, making many raids;
 the rest our fellow-Ithacans will supply
 till all my folds are full of sheep again.
 But now I must be off to the upland farm,
 our orchard green with trees, to see my father,
 good old man weighed down with so much grief for me.
 And you, dear woman, sensible as you are,
 I would advise you, still . . . 410
 quick as the rising sun the news will spread
 of the suitors that I killed inside the house.
 So climb to your lofty chamber with your women.
 Sit tight there. See no one. Question no one."

He strapped his burnished armor round his shoulders,
 roused Telemachus, the cowherd and the swineherd,
 and told them to take up weapons honed for battle.
 They snapped to commands, harnessed up in bronze,
 opened the doors and strode out, Odysseus in the lead.
 By now the daylight covered the land, but Pallas, 420
 shrouding them all in darkness,
 quickly led the four men out of town.