

Eidothea, a daughter of Proteus,
that great power, the Old Man of the Sea.
My troubles must have moved her to the heart
when she met me trudging by myself without my men.
They kept roaming around the beach, day in, day out,
fishing with twisted hooks, their bellies racked by hunger.
Well, she came right up to me, filled with questions:
'Are you a fool, stranger—soft in the head and lazy too?
Or do you let things slide because you *like* your pain?
Here you are, cooped up on an island far too long,
with no way out of it, none that you can find,
while all your shipmates' spirit ebbs away.'

So she prodded and I replied at once,
'Let me tell you, goddess—whoever you are—
I'm hardly landlocked here of my own free will.
So I must have angered one of the deathless gods
who rule the skies up there. But you tell *me*—
you immortals know it all—which one of you
blocks my way here, keeps me from my voyage?
How can I cross the swarming sea and reach home at last?'

And the glistening goddess reassured me warmly,
'Of course, my friend, I'll answer all your questions.
Who haunts these parts? Proteus of Egypt does,
the immortal Old Man of the Sea who never lies,
who sounds the deep in all its depths, Poseidon's servant.
He's my father, they say, he gave me life. And he,
if only you ambush him somehow and pin him down,
will tell you the way to go, the stages of your voyage,
how you can cross the swarming sea and reach home at last.
And he can tell you too, if you want to press him—
you *are* a king, it seems—
all that's occurred within your palace, good and bad,
while you've been gone your long and painful way.'

'Then *you* are the one'—I quickly took her up.
'Show me the trick to trap this ancient power,

or he'll see or sense me first and slip away.
It's hard for a mortal man to force a god.'

'True, my friend,' the glistening one agreed,
'and again I'll tell you all you need to know.
When the sun stands striding at high noon,
then up from the waves he comes—
the Old Man of the Sea who never lies—
under a West Wind's gust that shrouds him round
in shuddering dark swells, and once he's out on land
he heads for his bed of rest in deep hollow caves
and around him droves of seals—sleek pups bred
by his lovely ocean-lady—bed down too
in a huddle, flopping up from the gray surf,
giving off the sour reek of the salty ocean depths.
I'll lead you there myself at the break of day
and couch you all for attack, side-by-side.
Choose three men from your crew, choose well,
the best you've got aboard the good decked hulls.
Now I will tell you all the old wizard's tricks ...
First he will make his rounds and count the seals
and once he's checked their number, reviewed them all,
down in their midst he'll lie, like a shepherd with his flock.
That's your moment. Soon as you see him bedded down,
muster your heart and strength and hold him fast,
wildly as he writhes and fights you to escape.
He'll try all kinds of escape—twist and turn
into every beast that moves across the earth,
transforming himself into water, superhuman fire,
but you hold on for dear life, hug him all the harder!
And when, at last, he begins to ask you questions—
back in the shape you saw him sleep at first—
relax your grip and set the old god free
and ask him outright, hero,
which of the gods is up in arms against you?
How can you cross the swarming sea and reach home at last?'

So she urged and under the breaking surf she dove
as I went back to our squadron beached in sand,
my heart a heaving storm at every step ...
Once I reached my ship hauled up on shore
we made our meal and the godsent night came down
and then we slept at the sea's smooth shelving edge.
When young Dawn with her rose-red fingers shone once more
I set out down the coast of the wide-ranging sea,
praying hard to the gods for all their help,
taking with me the three men I trusted most
on every kind of mission.

Eidothea, now,
had slipped beneath the sea's engulfing folds
but back from the waves she came with four sealskins,
all freshly stripped, to deceive her father blind.
She scooped out lurking-places deep in the sand
and sat there waiting as we approached her post,
then couching us side-by-side she flung a sealskin
over each man's back. Now there was an ambush
that would have overpowered us all—overpowering,
true, the awful reek of all those sea-fed brutes!
Who'd dream of bedding down with a monster of the deep?
But the goddess sped to our rescue, found the cure
with ambrosia, daubing it under each man's nose—
that lovely scent, it drowned the creatures' stench.
So all morning we lay there waiting, spirits steeled,
while seals came crowding, jostling out of the sea
and flopped down in rows, basking along the surf.
At high noon the old man emerged from the waves
and found his fat-fed seals and made his rounds,
counting them off, counting *us* the first four,
but he had no inkling of all the fraud afoot.
Then down he lay and slept, but we with a battle-cry,
we rushed him, flung our arms around him—he'd lost nothing,
the old rascal, none of his cunning quick techniques!
First he shifted into a great bearded lion
and then a serpent—

a panther—

a ramping wild boar—

a torrent of water—

a tree with soaring branchtops—

but we held on for dear life, braving it out
until, at last, that quick-change artist,
the old wizard, began to weary of all this
and burst out into rapid-fire questions:

‘Which god, Menelaus, conspired with you
to trap me in ambush? seize me against my will?
What on earth do you want?’

‘You know, old man,’

I countered now. ‘Why put me off with questions?
Here I am, cooped up on an island far too long,
with no way out of it, none that I can find,
while my spirit ebbs away. But you tell *me*—
you immortals know it all—which one of you
blocks my way here, keeps me from my voyage?
How can I cross the swarming sea and reach home at last?’

‘How wrong you were!’ the seer shot back at once.
‘You should have offered Zeus and the other gods
a handsome sacrifice, *then* embarked, if you ever hoped
for a rapid journey home across the wine-dark sea.
It’s not your destiny yet to see your loved ones,
reach your own grand house, your native land at last,
not till you sail back through Egyptian waters—
the great Nile swelled by the rains of Zeus—
and make a splendid rite to the deathless gods
who rule the vaulting skies. Then, only then
will the gods grant you the voyage you desire.’

So he urged, and broke the heart inside me,
having to double back on the mist-bound seas,
back to Egypt, that, that long and painful way ...
Nevertheless I caught my breath and answered,
‘That I will do, old man, as you command.
But tell me this as well, and leave out nothing:
Did all the Achaeans reach home in the ships unharmed,
all we left behind, Nestor and I, en route from Troy?’

Or did any die some cruel death by shipwreck
or die in the arms of loved ones,
once they'd wound down the long coil of war?'

And he lost no time in saying, 'Son of Atreus,
why do you ask me that? Why do you need to know?
Why probe my mind? You won't stay dry-eyed long,
I warn you, once you have heard the whole story.
Many of them were killed, many survived as well,
but only two who captained your bronze-armored units
died on the way home—you know who died in the fighting,
you were there yourself.

And one is still alive,
held captive, somewhere, off in the endless seas ...

Ajax, now, went down with his long-oared fleet.
First Poseidon drove him onto the cliffs of Gyrae,
looming cliffs, then saved him from the breakers—
he'd have escaped his doom, too, despite Athena's hate,
if he hadn't flung that brazen boast, the mad blind fool.
"In the teeth of the gods," he bragged, "I have escaped
the ocean's sheer abyss!" Poseidon heard that frantic vaunt
and the god grasped his trident in both his massive hands
and struck the Gyraean headland, hacked the rock in two,
and the giant stump stood fast but the jagged spur
where Ajax perched at first, the raving madman—
toppling into the sea, it plunged him down, down
in the vast, seething depths. And so he died,
having drunk his fill of brine.

Your brother?

He somehow escaped that fate; Agamemnon got away
in his beaked ships. Queen Hera pulled him through.
But just as he came abreast of Malea's beetling cape
a hurricane snatched him up and swept him way off course—
groaning, desperate—driving him over the fish-infested sea
to the wild borderland where Thyestes made his home
in days of old and his son Aegisthus lived now.
But even from there a safe return seemed likely,

yes, the immortals swung the wind around to fair
and the victors sailed home. How *he* rejoiced,
Atrides setting foot on his fatherland once more—
he took that native earth in his hands and kissed it,
hot tears flooding his eyes, so thrilled to see his land!
But a watchman saw him too—from a lookout high above—
a spy that cunning Aegisthus stationed there,
luring the man with two gold bars in payment.
One whole year he'd watched ...
so the great king would not get past unseen.
his fighting power intact for self-defense.
The spy ran the news to his master's halls
and Aegisthus quickly set his stealthy trap.
Picking the twenty best recruits from town
he packed them in ambush at one end of the house,
at the other he ordered a banquet dressed and spread
and went to welcome the conquering hero, Agamemnon,
went with team and chariot, and a mind aswarm with evil.
Up from the shore he led the king, he ushered him in—
suspecting nothing of all his doom—he feasted him well
then cut him down as a man cuts down some ox at the trough!
Not one of your brother's men-at-arms was left alive,
none of Aegisthus' either. All, killed in the palace.'

So Proteus said, and his story crushed my heart.
I knelt down in the sand and wept. I'd no desire
to go on living and see the rising light of day.
But once I'd had my fill of tears and writhing there,
the Old Man of the Sea who never lies continued,
'No more now, Menelaus. How long must you weep?
Withering tears, what good can come of tears?
None I know of. Strive instead to return
to your native country—hurry home at once!
Either you'll find the murderer still alive
or Orestes will have beaten you to the kill.
You'll be in time to share the funeral feast.'

So he pressed, and I felt my heart, my old pride,
for all my grieving, glow once more in my chest
and I asked the seer in a rush of winging words,
'Those two I know now. Tell me the third man's name.
Who is still alive, held captive off in the endless seas?
Unless he's dead by now. I want to know the truth
though it grieves me all the more.'

'Odysseus'—

the old prophet named the third at once—
'Laertes' son, who makes his home in Ithaca ...
I saw him once on an island, weeping live warm tears
in the nymph Calypso's house—she holds him there by force.
He has no way to voyage home to his own native land,
no trim ships in reach, no crew to ply the oars
and send him scudding over the sea's broad back.
But about *your* destiny, Menelaus, dear to Zeus,
it's not for you to die
and meet your fate in the stallion-land of Argos,
no, the deathless ones will sweep you off to the world's end,
the Elysian Fields, where gold-haired Rhadamanthys waits,
where life glides on in immortal ease for mortal man;
no snow, no winter onslaught, never a downpour there
but night and day the Ocean River sends up breezes,
singing winds of the West refreshing all mankind.
All this because you are Helen's husband now—
the gods count *you* the son-in-law of Zeus.'

So he divined and down the breaking surf he dove
as I went back to the ships with my brave men,
my heart a rising tide at every step.
Once I reached my craft hauled up on shore
we made our meal and the godsent night came down
and then we slept at the sea's smooth shelving edge.
When young Dawn with her rose-red fingers shone once more
we hauled the vessels down to the sunlit breakers first
then stepped the masts amidships, canvas brailed—
the crews swung aboard, they sat to the oars in ranks
and in rhythm churned the water white with stroke on stroke.
Back we went to the Nile swelled by the rains of Zeus,