Antikleia

The Island of Aiaia

Odysseus, do not be anxious
for want of a pilot: set sail
and the North Wind will carry you.

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Prelude

After a year —
months slipping by,
seasons changing,
long days passing —
my loyal comrades spoke to me:
My lord, remember your home –
if you are fated to be saved
and reach your fatherland.

So they spoke,
and my proud heart agreed.
All that day we sat and feasted
on plentiful meat and sweet wine.

When night came they slept,
but I went up to Kirke’s bed,
embraced her knees,
and she heard me.

Kirke, keep faith and send me home.
I long for home, as do my men.
They wear me down with pleadings
whenever you are not there.

Laertes’ son, wily Odysseus,
sprung from Zeus, do not stay here
unwillingly. But before going home
you must go to the underworld
to consult Teiresias’ ghost;
along among the dead he keeps
his mind: the rest are flitting shades.

O Kirke, who will guide us there?
No one ever sailed to Hades.

Odysseus, do not be anxious
for want of a pilot: set sail
and the North Wind will carry you.

After crossing Oceanus
land by Persephone’s grove
and go to Hades’ dank house.

Dig a pit, a cubit each way
and pour libations to the dead.
then when you have prayed
offer a ram and a black ewe.
Turn their heads towards Erebus
but you must turn the other way
and look towards the river.

Then many ghosts will come.
Your men must sacrifice the sheep
and pray to mighty Hades
and to revered Persephone.

You must draw your sword and sit there
and keep the dead from the blood
till you have heard Teiresias.
He will tell of your coming home.

She spoke, and Dawn rose.
I went and roused my men,
speaking to each in turn.

No more dreaming in sweet sleep!
Let’s go: Kirke has shown the way.

I spoke, and they agreed
but we did not escape unscathed.

Elpenor, our youngest comrade,
not very brave, none too clever,
had drunk too much and gone to sleep
on the roof of Kirke’s palace.

Roused by the noise of his comrades
he jumped up, forgot the ladder,
fell from the roof and broke his neck.
His soul went down to Hades.

I spoke to my comrades:

You think you are sailing home
but first we must go to Hades
to consult Theban Teiresias.

Interlude

Voyage to the Land
of the Kimmerians

We dragged our ship
down to the bright sea; and Kirke
the dread goddess gave us a wind,
a good comrade, to fill our sail.

When all was made fast we sat
at our oars. Wind and helmsman
kept her course steady all day
till we reached earth-circling Ocean.

There the Kimmerians’ land
lies hidden in fog and cloud.
The sun never shines, but men
live in miserable darkness.

We beached, landed the sheep
and went along Oceanus’ shore
until we came to the place
Kirke had told me about.

Perimedes and Eurylochos
held the sheep; I dug a pit
for the blood and round it poured
libations to all the dead.

Then came the ghosts from Erebus:
brides, unwed youths, toilworn old men,
tender girls, with hearts new to grief,
men in bloody armour, killed in war.

They swarmed round the pit
with an eerie clamour; and I
was gripped by pallid fear.

First came the ghost of Elpenor.
We had left him in Kirke’s hall
unwept, unburied; now I wept
with pity, and spoke to him:

Elpenor, how did you come here?
I sailed here, but you came faster.

Laertes’ son, wily Odysseus,
sprung from Zeus,
a malign god and too much wine
were my undoing.

I went to sleep on Kirke’s roof,
forgot the ladder, fell headlong
and broke my neck; my ghost
came down to Hades’ house.

I implore you, by those not here,
your wife, the father who reared you
and your son Telemachos
whom you left alone in your hall:

I know that when you leave this place
your ship will return to Aiaia;
when you are there, my lord, I ask
that you remember me.

Do not leave me there unwept
and unburied: you might incur
the gods’ wrath.

Burn me on the shore
and build a mound in my memory,
that men yet unborn
may know of me.

Do these things, and on the mound
plant my oar with which in life
I rowed alongside my comrades.

All this, unlucky man, I’ll do.

Thus we two sat talking sadly,
I on one side guarding the blood,
while opposite me the phantom
of my comrade talked at length.

Then my dead mother’s ghost came up,
Antikleia, daughter of great
Autolykos. I had left her
alive when I set out for Troy.

I wept to see her and my heart
pitied her. But I would not
let her come near the blood until
I had questioned Teiresias.

Then came the ghost of Theban
Teiresias, golden staff in hand.
And he knew me and spoke to me:

Son of Laertes, wily Odysseus,
why, unlucky man, have you left
the sunlight and come to the dead?
Draw back, let me drink.

I drew back and sheathed my sword
and when he had drunk the blood
the great prophet spoke to me.
You ask for a sweet homecoming, 
Odysseus, but it will be hard 
to escape Poseidon’s hatred 
because you blinded his dear son.

Yet despite all you may reach home. 
There will be troubles in your house, 
haughty men, wasting your wealth, 
courting your wife, bringing gifts.

You will take vengeance on them. 
But then take an oar and travel 
till you find men who do not know 
the sea, and do not salt their food.

When you meet a traveller 
who thinks you’re carrying a fan 
for winnowing, then plant the oar.

Make a handsome sacrifice 
to Poseidon – ram, bull and boar. 
Go home and offer hecatombs 
to all the gods, one by one.

Death shall come gently to you, 
far from the sea, when you are old 
and your people prospering 
around you. I speak the truth.

Teiresias, surely this must be 
as the gods have spun the thread. 
But tell me this: I see here 
the ghost of my dead mother.

She sits in silence near the blood 
and does not look at her son 
or speak to him. Tell me, lord, 
how will she recognise me?

That is easily told. 
Any ghost you allow near the blood 
will speak the truth to you. Any 
whom you refuse will go away.

So saying, great Teiresias’ ghost 
grew back into the house of Hades. 
Then my mother’s ghost came, drank 
the blood, knew me, and spoke, weeping.

Child, how did you come down here 
though still alive? It is hard
for the living to see these realms:
only a good ship can get here.

Have you come here from Troy, after
long travels with ship and comrades?
Have you not yet reached Ithaka
nor seen your wife in your house?

Mother, necessity brought me
to question Teiresias’ ghost.

I have not seen Greece
nor set foot on my land
since I left with Agamemnon
to fight against the Trojans.

But tell me, how did death take you?
Did a long sickness destroy you
or Artemis’ painless arrows?

And my father? The son I left?
Do they still hold my wealth or has
some other man seized it? Do they
think I shall never return?

And tell me about my wife.
What is in her mind? Is she still
caring for my son or has she
married the best of the Achaians?

Indeed she remains in your hall
with faithful heart. Sadly
the days and nights pass,
as she weeps.

But no-one has usurped your place.
Telemachos holds your lands
and goes to the public banquets
as is fitting: all invite him.

But your father keeps to the farm
and never comes to the town.
In winter he has no warm bed
but sleeps with the slaves by the fire.

In summer he sleeps in the vineyard
here and there on piles of leaves.
There he lies, sorrowing,
burdened by grief for you, and age.

That was what I died of too.
Not Artemis, nor a disease
that steals life with hateful weakness.
My longing for you, Odysseus,  
for your wise words, your gentleness,  
this robbed me of honey-sweet life.  

So she spoke, and I wondered  
how to embrace my dead mother.  

Three times I started towards her  
wishing to clasp her. Three times  
she fluttered away like a dream  
or a shadow. Sorrowing, I said:  

Mother, let me embrace you,  
and mourn with you, even in Hades.  
Or are you just an image, sent  
by Persephone to grieve me?  

My child, unluckiest of men:  
Persephone does not deceive you,  
but so it is when mortals die.  

Sinews no longer hold flesh  
and bones together once the fire  
destroys them: but the ghost flutters  
off like a dream, and is gone.  

But hurry now, back to the light,  
as fast as you can. Remember  
these things so that later  
you can tell them to your wife.  

So we talked; then the women came  
sent by noble Persephone,  
wives and daughters of princes.  

ΤΕΛΟΣ