Penelope

But interpret a dream for me:
I keep twenty geese here. I dreamed
an eagle came down and killed them.
They lay dead, the eagle flew off.

PROLOGUE IN HADES

Hermes summoned the suitors’ ghosts,
holding his beautiful gold staff
which can waken or send to sleep.
He led, they followed, shrill-voiced.

Like bats screeching in a cave
when one has fallen from the rock,
the shrill ghosts followed Hermes
the Healer, down mouldering paths.

They passed Ocean’s stream, the White Rock,
the gates of the Sun, the Land of Dreams
and reached the asphodel meadow
where dwell ghosts, phantoms of men.

They met the ghosts of Achilles,
of sorrowful Agamemnon,
and of those who died with him.
The ghost of Agamemnon spoke:

Fortunate, godlike Achilles,
you died, but your fame will endure.
At war’s end, what pleasure had I?
My wife and Aigisthos killed me.

As the ghosts spoke, Hermes drew near,
leading the suitors. Amazed,
the two approached. Agamemnon
recognized Amphimedon.

Amphimedon, why are you here,
under the earth? And these,
young men all of an age,
surely the best of their city?

Most noble king Agamemnon,
I shall tell you the whole story
of our vile end in death
and how it was brought about.
We wooed the wife of Odysseus (he was long gone). She would not say yes or no, but planned our deaths. She started a piece of weaving.

‘Young men,’ she said, ‘my suitors since Odysseus is dead: you must wait while I weave Laertes’ shroud, lest I be blamed for its lack.’

Our proud hearts agreed, and by day she wove at her loom; but at night she undid her work by torchlight. For three years she fooled us suitors. But in the fourth year we found out, for one of her women told us. We caught her undoing her work, so then she had to complete it.

Then, by ill luck, Odysseus returned and came to his swineherd’s hut; and his son came back from Pylos.

ACT II: THE SON

The ship that brought Telemachos from Pylos now reached harbour in Ithaka, and a herald was sent to tell Penelope.

Wise Penelope came down, looking like Artemis, or like golden Aphrodite; she wept, kissed her son, and spoke:

You have come, sweet Telemachos, though I feared you would not survive
that secret voyage to Pylos.
So have you news of your father?

Mother, Nestor in Pylos
received me kindly, like a son,
but he could tell me nothing
of Odysseus, living or dead.

He sent me with his own horses
to Menelaos, Atreus’ son,
known for his great war-cry,
to whom I told my story.

He told me Odysseus was held
on an island by Kalypso,
with no ship and no companions.
When I heard this I came home.

Meanwhile the insolent suitors
threw discus and javelin outside,
till Medon, whom they liked best
among the heralds, spoke thus:

Young men, you have had your sport.
Come in, and we’ll serve your meal.
It is no bad thing to dine
at the proper time.

Now Odysseus entered the house,
looking old, ragged, with a stick
to lean on. He sat by the door
and Antinoos spoke to him:

Sit still and eat, stranger,
or go elsewhere, or you may
be taken and dragged through the house,
and your skin flayed from your body.

But the suitors reproached him:
Do not ill-treat the stranger.
Gods sometimes appear in disguise, 
to observe how men behave.

Penelope heard that a guest 
had been insulted in her hall.
She said: I pray that Apollo 
will strike the man who struck him.

The housekeeper, Eurynome, 
said: If our prayers were answered, 
none of these men would see the dawn.
And wise Penelope answered:

They are all hateful, Eurynome, 
but Antinoos is deadly.
A stranger asked for food: all gave 
but Antinoos, who insulted him.

So she spoke with her women, 
while Odysseus was eating below.
Then she called the swineherd and said: 
Eumaios, send me the stranger.

I shall greet him and question him, 
asking for news of Odysseus, 
or if perhaps he has seen him 
for he seems to have travelled far.

Send him here. 
Let the suitors stay, here or outside. 
Their food is untouched at home 
while they guzzle my meat and wine.

No man like Odysseus is here 
to protect the household from ruin. 
But if Odysseus came home 
he and his son would punish them.

She spoke, and Telemachos sneezed; 
the hall echoed to the noise. 
Penelope laughed at this 
and spoke again to Eumaios:
Send me the stranger. Did you hear Telemachos sneeze at my words? Let this portend the suitors will die, and not one of them escape.

But now Athene gave her the idea of showing herself to the suitors, to excite them and gain honour from husband and son.

Then Athene spread sweet sleep over Penelope. She slept, and Athene increased her beauty so that she would be admired.

Then her maids came from the hall, and their noise woke her. Released from sleep she rubbed her cheeks with her hands and spoke:

In my pain, what soft sleep wrapped me! If Artemis would give me a death so soft, it would cure my grief for my beloved husband.

She entered the hall with two maids. Face hidden, she approached the suitors. They all felt weak with desire. Eurymachos spoke to her, saying:

If all the men in Greece could see you, you would have far more suitors here; you surpass all other women in beauty and in wisdom.

I lost my beauty on the day the Greeks, with Odysseus, set sail for Troy. If he returned, it would restore me. But now I grieve.

Soon a hateful marriage awaits me, my happiness taken by Zeus.

But the worst is how you all behave: the old way was for suitors to compete in bringing gifts, not to eat up another’s wealth.

Great Odysseus heard and was pleased that she was coaxing gifts from them.
though with other aims in mind. Then Antinoos answered her:

Lady, accept any gifts any of your suitors may bring. But we shall stay here until you choose one of us to marry.

All the suitors sent for gifts, and the maids took them to her room. The suitors turned to dance and song. Black night came as they made merry.

ACT III: THE STRANGER

Now wise Penelope came down, beautiful as a goddess. Her maids cleared the tables and made up the fires for warmth.

Melantho scolded Odysseus: Will you stay here all night, spying? Go out, be content with your meal, or be driven out by force.

Why are you so angry with me? Is it because I am dirty, and my clothes are poor, and I beg? I do this because I have to.

Hussy, I know what you’re doing. Shame on you, you already know I wish to question the stranger about my husband for whom I grieve.

Eurynome, bring a chair. She brought it, and threw a fleece on it. Great Odysseus sat down, and wise Penelope spoke:

Stranger, may I begin by asking you some questions. Who are you? Where do you come from? What city? Who are your parents?

Lady, you are peerless. But do not ask me these things, they only increase my sorrow. One should not be always grieving.

Stranger, I lost my beauty when the Greeks, with Odysseus, set sail
for Troy. If he returned, it would restore me. But now I grieve.

Princes from nearby islands, and from Ithaka, woo me and devour my estate. So I pay little heed to strangers.

But I pine for Odysseus. These men press me: I spun a web of wiles.

Now I cannot escape marriage. It angers my son that these men devour his wealth. Now a grown man, he could lead a house honoured by Zeus.

But come, tell me your family, for you did not come from an oak, as they tell in the old stories, nor were you born from a stone.

Wife of Odysseus, still you ask? I shall tell you, although it will increase my pain. There is a land called Crete, with many cities.

Knossos is there, where Minos ruled. I am his grandson. My brother Idomeneos went to Troy, but I, the younger, stayed behind.

Odysseus was my guest there, stormbound on his way to Troy. The Greeks stayed twelve days, then the wind dropped and they set sail.

So he told lies that sounded true. While she listened, her tears flowed as snow melts in a warm wind. She wept for the man beside her.

Odysseus pitied his wife, but he kept his eyes hard and cold and hid his tears. She wept her fill then answered, and spoke again.

I think I must probe, to find out if you really met my husband. What did he wear? How did he look? What of the men who were with him?
It is hard to tell you, lady,  
for it was twenty years ago  
that he set sail from my land,  
but this is how I recall him.

Odysseus’ cloak was purple wool.  
A gold brooch, with two clasps, held it.  
On this a hound preyed on a fawn.  
The lifelike work amazed us all.

So he spoke, touching her heart  
and making her weep again,  
knowing the proofs he gave. She wept  
her fill, then spoke to him again.

Stranger, I pitied you, but now  
you shall be loved and honoured here.  
It was I who made that cloak,  
and I fastened the shining brooch.

I shall never welcome him home.  
back to the land of his fathers.  
A malign fate sent Odysseus  
to evil Troy, not to be named.

Wife of Odysseus, weep no more.  
Not that I blame you: a wife  
grieves to lose even a husband  
less great than godlike Odysseus.

But stop weeping, and hear me:  
I tell you truly and clearly  
Odysseus is in Thesprotia,  
with treasure, but no ship or crew.

So he is safe and near home.  
I will swear by Zeus and your hearth  
that Odysseus will be here  
before the next full moon.

Stranger, if your words came true  
you would feel my gratitude.  
I would give you so many gifts  
that anyone would call you blessed.

But these are my real thoughts:  
Odysseus will never come home  
and you’ll have no help for your journey,  
with no master here to give it.

But, maids, wash the stranger’s feet,  
Prepare a bed with warm covers;
tomorrow, bathe and anoint him,  
to sit beside Telemachus.

If any suitor annoys him,  
so much the worse for that man.  
his rage will achieve nothing.

Wife of Odysseus, since I left  
Crete, I have hated soft beds.  
I will lie tonight as often  
I have done through sleepless nights.

If anyone washes my feet  
let it not be one of your maids —  
but some old woman might do it,  
one who has known much suffering.

Friend, guests are seldom so thoughtful.  
Odysseus’ old nurse is here;  
though frail, she shall wash your feet.

Come then, wise Eurykleia,  
wash the feet of one the same age  
as Odysseus. By now his hands  
and feet must have aged like this man’s.

The old woman brought  
the gleaming basin  
and washed his feet.

Washed and anointed, Odysseus  
sat by the fire to warm himself.  
He hid his scar under his rags.  
Wise Penelope spoke:

Stranger, I’ve something to ask you.  
Soon it will be time to sleep,  
for those who are able to. For me,  
wretched nights follow grieving days.

But interpret a dream for me:  
I keep twenty geese here. I dreamed  
an eagle came down and killed them.  
They lay dead, the eagle flew off.

I wept, in my dream, and my maids  
came. But the eagle returned;  
it perched on a beam of the roof  
and spoke with the voice of a man:
Fear not, Ikarios’ daughter.
No dream this, but a true vision.
The geese are your suitors, and I
am your husband, come to kill them.

So he spoke, and then I awoke
from sweet sleep, and looked.
There were the geese in my halls,
feeding on grain, as usual.

Lady, this dream has one meaning,
which Odysseus himself has told you.
the suitors’ fate is plain:
every one of them will die.

I am not sure my dream was true.
But today I plan a trial.
The suitors must shoot an arrow
through twelve axes, as Odysseus did.

I’ll set up the row of axes
Whoever shoots the arrow through,
him I’ll marry, and leave this house,
though it will haunt my dreams.

Wife of Odysseus, do it soon.
Before they can string the bow
and shoot the arrow, resourceful Odysseus will be back here.

Stranger, if you sat by and talked, I should never go to sleep. But everyone needs sleep, the gods have ordered it so.

So I shall go up to my room, to my bed, a place of tears now; but you may sleep here in the hall, on the floor or on a bed.

She went to her room with her maids and sat in her bed, weeping.

ACT IV: THE BOW

Inspired by Athene wise Penelope decided to set up the competition with the bow in Odysseus’ house.

She went to the room where Odysseus’ bow was stored. She reached up and lifted it down, then took it from its case weeping as she did so.

When she had wept her fill she went back to the hall carrying the bow and quiver with its many deadly arrows.

When she reached the suitors she stood, with her face hidden, a maid on either side, and spoke to the suitors thus:

Hear me, you haughty men who eat and drink in my house, your only excuse being your desire to marry me.

Here is Odysseus’ great bow. String it and shoot an arrow clean through a row of axes. I’ll marry the man who does it.
She told the swineherd Eumaios
to set up the row of axes.
He and the oxherd were weeping.
Antinoos saw and rebuked them:

Fools, never looking ahead,
why weep, troubling your lady?
She has enough pain already
from the loss of her dear husband.

Eat in silence, or go outside.
Leave the bow so we can compete.
It will be hard: not one of us
matches Odysseus, whom I knew.

Yet he hoped that he would succeed.
But he would be the first man killed
by Odysseus, whom he slighted.
Now Telemachos spoke:

Surely Zeus has driven me mad.
My dear mother, wise as she is,
says she will marry and leave
this house and I laugh about it.

Come suitors, you know how great
is the prize — a peerless woman.
So let’s have no more delay
but get on with stringing the bow.

Take turns in order, my friends,
left to right, starting from where
the cupbearer pours the wine.

They agreed. Leiodes tried first.
He could not string the bow
but hurt his soft hands on the string.
He spoke to the other suitors:

Friends, let someone else try.
I fear many princes will die
in the attempt, since failure
is more to be feared than death.
He set down the bow and arrow
and went back to his seat.
Antinoos rebuked him by name.

Leiodes, what are you saying?
This bow will not be fatal
just because you cannot string it.
Other suitors will soon do it.

Melanthios, light a fire
and bring a cake of tallow.
We shall warm and grease the bow
and then finish the contest.

Melanthios relit the fire
and brought a cake of tallow.
They warmed and greased the bow
and still they could not string it.

Eurymachos now took the bow
warming it in the firelight.
Even he could not string it
and spoke aloud in his anger.

Shame! I am grieved for us all —
not because of the marriage:
there are many other women
here and in other cities.

but the worst is to know that we
fall so far short of Odysseus
that we cannot string his bow.
We shall be reproached for ever.

No shame, Eurymachos, for sure.
Today is Apollo’s feast-day,
no day to draw bows: put it by,
leave the axes — no-one will take them.

Come, more wine. Put away the bow.
At dawn we’ll send for the best goats
to sacrifice to Apollo.
Then we can finish the contest.

All agreed; they washed their hands
and mixed the wine for drinking
but when they had drunk their fill
resourceful Odysseus spoke.

Suitors, let me speak as I wish.
Rightly you wait till tomorrow
when the god will pick the victor.
But now let me have the bow
  to try my hands and my strength.
  Am I still strong as I once was
  or weak from travel and hunger?

  They were all angry, fearing
  that he might bend the bow.
  Antinoos then rebuked him:

    You are a fool, stranger,
    eavesdropping on what we say.
    No one else would be allowed.
    You have drunk too much.

    It is not right, Antinoos,
    to bully a guest of the house.
    If this stranger strung the bow
    do you think I would marry him?

    Give him the bow, let us see
    what happens. If he succeeds
    I shall give him clothes and weapons
    and send him wherever he wants.

    Mother, not one of the Greeks,
    From Ithaka or from elsewhere,
    has a better right than I
    to give or withhold this bow.

    Go back to your women’s work,
    to the distaff and the loom,
    and set your maids to work too.
    The bow stays here. I rule this house.

    Amazed, Penelope withdrew
    thinking of her son’s words.
    Upstairs she wept for Odysseus
    till gray-eyed Athene sent sleep.

ACT V: THE HUSBAND

    The old woman, exultant, went up
    to tell Penelope her husband
    was in the house. She hobbled quickly
    and reaching her mistress said:

    Wake up, dear child, come and see
    what you have longed for. Odysseus
    is back and has killed the suitors
    who plagued his house and his son.

    Dear nurse, the gods have made you mad.
    They turn wise people into fools
and make the frivolous wise.
You were sensible until now.

Why mock me in my sorrow
and wake me from the best sleep
I have had since Odysseus left
for evil Troy, not to be named?

Go back down to the women’s room.
If any other of my maids
woke me like that, she’d be sorry.
Only your age protects you.

Child, truly Odysseus is here,
that stranger the suitors abused.
Telemachos knew, but kept quiet
till he could punish the suitors.

Dear nurse, tell me the whole story.
Is he really back, as you say?
How could he attack the suitors,
one man against all of them?

I neither saw nor was told
but I heard them being killed.
We were all shut in the storeroom
till Telemachos called me out.

Odysseus stood bloodstained, bodies
heaped on the floor around him.
Now he is cleaning the hall
with sulphur, and has sent for you.

Come, so you can both be happy
after all you have suffered.
He is here, he has found his wife
and son and has killed the suitors.

Dear nurse, do not triumph yet.
You know how welcome he would be
but your story is wrong — some god
killed these men. Odysseus is lost.

My child, what are you saying?
He is home, but you deny it.
Here’s proof: I have seen the scar
from when a boar tusked him.

I saw it when I washed his feet
but he would not let me tell you.
Come, I will stake my life on it.
Punish me if I deceive you.
Dear nurse, clever though you are
you cannot understand the gods.
Still, I’ll go to my son and see
the dead suitors — and their killer.

She went down, wondering whether
she should keep her distance
and question her dear husband
or clasp and kiss his head and hands.

She came in and sat down
opposite him in the firelight.
Odysseus sat waiting to see
whether his wife would speak to him.

She sat in silence, wondering.
Sometimes she looked at him
but could not recognize him.
Telemachos rebuked her:

Mother, you are cruel and hard.
Why not sit beside my father?
No other woman would hang back
from a husband who has come home.

Child, I am lost in amazement.
I cannot speak or question him,
or look him straight in the face.

If he is Odysseus come home,
we shall recognize each other
by secret signs known to us both.

Telemachos, let her test me
and soon she will see more clearly.
I am dirty and ragged now
so she dislikes and disowns me.

But we must plan what to do.
You might have to flee after killing
one man — we have killed the finest
youths of Ithaka. Consider!

You must decide what to do,
dear father, for you are known
as the most resourceful of men.

Well then, first wash and dress.
Tell the women to choose their clothes.
We’ll have music to lead the dance,
people will think it’s a wedding.
No-one must hear that the suitors
are dead till we get away
to our farm. There we’ll see
what ideas the Olympian gives.

They obeyed him: they washed and dressed.
The women put on their finery
The minstrel took up the lyre
and played to lead the dancing.

The house rang with the sound of feet
as they danced. Anyone passing
would think: Our queen has married;
she did not wait for her husband.

But he would speak in ignorance.
Now Eurynome bathed Odysseus
and dressed him in beautiful clothes;
and Athene gave him beauty.

He left the bath looking
like a god, returned to his seat
opposite his wife, and spoke:

You are strange. The gods made you
harder than other women.
No other woman would hang back
from a husband who has come home.

Come then, nurse, make up a bed
so that I can lie here alone
for her heart is made of iron.

You are strange. I am not proud
nor am I scornful or dumbstruck;
but I know what you looked like
when you left Ithaka by ship.

Eurykleia, make him a bed.
Bring his own bed from the chamber,
put it out here for him, covered
with fleeces, blankets, and covers.

A bitter word you have spoken.
Who has moved my bed? No-one
could do it unless a god helped.
The bed is unique. I made it.

An olive tree grew in the court,
I built the bedroom round it
with close-set stones, a good roof
and jointed, well-fitting doors.
Then I trimmed the olive tree
and made it into the bedpost.
Gold, silver, ivory adorned
the bed, and the thongs were oxhide.

That is what my bed was like,
lady, but I do not know
if it is still there; or if someone
has cut the tree and moved it?

Her knees and heart were weakened
as she recognized the proofs.
Then she wept, ran to him,
embraced and kissed him, saying:

Do not be angry, Odysseus.
The jealous gods sent us sorrow.
Do not be angry or blame me
for not greeting you straight away.

I have always feared that someone
would try to deceive me. There are
many dishonest men about.

But since you described our bed
which no-one has seen but us
and one maid — now I am convinced
although I was so stubborn.

While the couple talked, the nurse
and Eurynome made the bed
by torchlight, with soft covers.

When the bed was made the nurse
went to rest but Eurynome
led the pair to their room
and went back leaving them alone.

Joyfully they went to bed
and renewed their old rites.
Telemachos halted the dance
and everyone went to bed.

When husband and wife had made love
they talked, telling their own stories.
The lady told of the suitors
and all that they had devoured.

Odysseus told what he had done
and what he had endured.
She heard with delight, and sleep
did not come till all was told.
So, Agamemnon, we died, and our bodies lie uncared for in the halls of Odysseus.

As yet our people know nothing, or they would have washed our wounds, laid us out and mourned us: that is what is due to the dead.

O fortunate Odysseus what a virtuous wife you won. Penelope was constant and never forgot her husband.

Her name will live for ever. The gods themselves will make songs to bring delight to mortal men and honour wise Penelope.

How different from Clytemnestra, who killed her wedded husband. A hateful song shall be hers for she dishonoured her whole sex.

So these two souls conversed, standing in the halls of Hades beneath the depths of the earth.

Even Helen would not have slept with a stranger if she had known that the Greeks would bring her home. A god stirred her; we all suffered.

He wept, holding his wife. As land appears welcome to sailors shipwrecked and swimming ashore so was her husband to her as she gazed at him and held him embraced in her white arms.

Now rosy-fingered Dawn would have found them weeping, but Athene
planned otherwise, and delayed Dawn who could not harness her horses.

Odysseus strung the bow with ease and shot through the line of axes, then stood by the door, glaring, and struck down Prince Antinoos.

Then he shot arrows at the rest who fell one after the other. A god must have helped: they killed us all. The floor reeked, ghastly cries rose up.