BOOK IX

NEW COASTS
AND POSEIDON'S SON
Now this was the reply Odysseus made:

"Alkinoös, king and admiration of men, how beautiful this is, to hear a minstrel gifted as yours: a god he might be, singing! There is no boon in life more sweet, I say, than when a summer joy holds all the realm, and banqueters sit listening to a harper in a great hall, by rows of tables heaped with bread and roast meat, while a steward goes to dip up wine and brim your cups again. Here is the flower of life, it seems to me! But now you wish to know my cause for sorrow—and thereby give me cause for more.

What shall I say first? What shall I keep until the end? The gods have tried me in a thousand ways. But first my name: let that be known to you, and if I pull away from pitiless death, friendship will bind us, though my land lies far.

I am Laërtés' son, Odysseus. Men hold me formidable for guile in peace and war: this fame has gone abroad to the sky's rim.

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My home is on the peaked sea-mark of Ithaka
under Mount Neion's wind-blown robe of leaves,
in sight of other islands—Doukhilion,
Samé, wooded Zakynthos—Ithaka
being most lofty in that coastal sea,
and northwest, while the rest lie east and south.
A rocky isle, but good for a boy's training;
I shall not see on earth a place more dear,
though I have been detained long by Kalypso,
loveliest among goddesses, who held me
in her smooth caves, to be her heart's delight,
as Kiré of Aiaia, the enchantress,
desired me, and detained me in her hall.
But in my heart I never gave consent.
Where shall a man find sweetness to surpass
his own home and his parents? In far lands
he shall not, though he find a house of gold.

What of my sailing, then, from Troy?

What of those years
of rough adventure, weathered under Zeus?
The wind that carried west from Ilion
brought me to Ismaros, on the far shore,
a stronghold on the coast of the Kikonés.
I stormed that place and killed the men who fought.
Plunder we took, and we enslaved the women,
to make division, equal shares to all—but on the spot I told them: 'Back, and quickly!
Out to sea again!' My men were mutinous,
fools, on stores of wine. Sheep after sheep
they butchered by the surf, and shambling cattle,
feasting,—while fugitives went inland, running
to call to arms the main force of Kikonés.
This was an army, trained to fight on horseback
or, where the ground required, on foot. They came
with dawn over that terrain like the leaves
and blades of spring. So doom appeared to us,
dark word of Zeus for us, our evil days.
My men stood up and made a fight of it—
backed on the ships, with lances kept in play,
from bright morning through the blaze of noon
holding our beach, although so far outnumbered;
but when the sun passed toward unyoking time,
them the Akhaians, one by one, gave way.
Six benches were left empty in every ship
that evening when we pulled away from death.
And this new grief we bore with us to sea:
our precious lives we had, but not our friends.
No ship made sail next day until some shipmate
had raised a cry, three times, for each poor ghost
unfleshed by the Kikonés on that field.

Now Zeus the lord of cloud roused in the north
a storm against the ships, and driving veils
of squall moved down like night on land and sea.
The bows went plunging at the gust; sails
cracked and lashed out strips in the big wind.
We saw death in that fury, dropped the yards,
unshipped the oars, and pulled for the nearest lee:
then two long days and nights we lay offshore
worn out and sick at heart, tasting our grief,
until a third Dawn came with ringlets shining.
Then we put up our masts, hauled sail, and rested,
letting the steersmen and the breeze take over.

I might have made it safely home, that time,
but as I came round Malea the current
took me out to sea, and from the north
a fresh gale drove me on, past Kythera.
Nine days I drifted on the teeming sea
before dangerous high winds. Upon the tenth
we came to the coastline of the Lotos Eaters,
who live upon that flower. We landed there
to take on water. All ships' companies
mustered alongside for the mid-day meal.
Then I sent out two picked men and a runner
to learn what race of men that land sustained.
They fell in, soon enough, with Lotos Eaters,
who showed no will to do us harm, only
offering the sweet Lotos to our friends—
but those who ate this honeyed plant, the Lotos,
never cared to report, nor to return:
they longed to stay forever, browsing on
that native bloom, forgetful of their homeland.
I drove them, all three wailing, to the ships,
tied them down under their rowing benches,
and called the rest: 'All hands aboard;
come, clear the beach and no one taste
the Lotos, or you lose your hope of home.'
Filing in to their places by the rowlocks
my oarsmen dipped their long oars in the surf,
and we moved out again on our sea faring.

In the next land we found were Kyklopes,
Giants, louts, without a law to bless them.
In ignorance leaving the fruitage of the earth in mystery
to the immortal gods, they neither plow
nor sow by hand, nor till the ground, though grain—
Wild wheat and barley—grows untended, and
Wine-grapes, in clusters, ripen in heaven's rain.
Kyklopes have no muster and no meeting,
No consultation or old tribal ways,
but each one dwells in his own mountain cave
dealimg out rough justice to wife and child,
Indifferent to what the others do.

Across the wide bay from the mainland
there lies a desert island, not far out,
but still not close inshore. Wild goats in hundreds
breed there; and no human being comes
Upon the isle to startle them—no hunter
Of all who ever tracked with hounds through forests
Or had rough going over mountain trails.
The isle, unplanted and untilled, a wilderness,
Pastures goats alone. And this is why:
Good ships like ours with checkpaint at the bows
Are far beyond the Kyklopes. No shipwright
toils among them, shaping and building up
Symmetrical trim hulls to cross the sea
And visit all the seaboarding towns, as men do

Who go and come in commerce over water.
This isle—seagoing folk would have annexed it
And built their homesteads on it: all good land,
Fertile for every crop in season: lush
Well-watered meadows along the shore, vines in profusion,
Prairie, clear for the plow, where grain would grow
Chin high by harvest time, and rich sub-soil.
The island cove is landlocked, so you need
No hawsers out astern, bow-stones or mooring:
Run in and ride there till the day your crews
Chafe to be under sail, and a fair wind blows.
You'll find good water flowing from a cavern
Through dusky poplars into the upper bay.
Here we made harbor. Some god guided us
That night, for we could barely see our bows
In the dense fog around us, and no moonlight
Filtered through the overcast. No look-out,
Nobody saw the island dead ahead,
Nor even the great landward rolling billow
That took us in: we found ourselves in shallows,
Keels grazing shore: so furled our sails
And disembarked where the low ripples broke.
There on the beach we lay, and slept till morning.

When Dawn spread out her finger tips of rose
We turned out marvelling, to tour the isle,
While Zeus's shy nymph daughters flushed wild goats
down from the heights—a breakfast for my men.
We ran to fetch our hunting bows and long-shanked
Lances from the ships, and in three companies
We took our shots. Heaven gave us game a-plenty:
For every one of twelve ships in my squadron
Nine goats fell to be shared; my lot was ten.
So there all day, until the sun went down,
We made our feast on meat galore, and wine—
Wine from the ship, for our supply held out,
So many jars were filled at Ithmaros
From stores of the Kikones that we plundered.
We gazed, too, at Kyklopes Land, so near,
We saw their smoke, heard bleating from their flocks.
But after sundown, in the gathering dusk, we slept again above the wash of ripples.

When the young Dawn with finger tips of rose came in the east, I called my men together and made a speech to them:

'Old shipmates, friends, the rest of you stand by; I'll make the crossing in my own ship, with my own company, and find out what the mainland natives are—for they may be wild savages, and lawless, or hospitable and god fearing men.'

At this I went aboard, and gave the word to cast off by the stern. My oarsmen followed, filing in to their benches by the rowlocks, and all in line dipped oars in the grey sea.

As we rowed on, and nearer to the mainland, at one end of the bay, we saw a cavern yawning above the water, screened with laurel, and many rams and goats about the place inside a sheepfold—made from slabs of stone earthfast between tall trunks of pine and rugged towering oak trees.

A prodigious man slept in this cave alone, and took his flocks to graze afield—remote from all companions, knowing none but savage ways, a brute so huge, he seemed no man at all of those who eat good wheaten bread; but he seemed rather a shaggy mountain reared in solitude.

We beached there, and I told the crew to stand by and keep watch over the ship; as for myself I took my twelve best fighters and went ahead. I had a goatskin full of that sweet liquor that Euanthès' son, Maron, had given me. He kept Apollo's holy grove at Ismaros; for kindness we showed him there, and showed his wife and child, he gave me seven shining golden talents perfectly formed, a solid silver winebowl, and then this liquor—twelve two-handled jars of brandy, pure and fiery. Now a slave in Maron's household knew this drink; only he, his wife and the storeroom mistress knew; and they would put one cupful—ruby-colored, honey-smooth—in twenty more of water, but still the sweet scent hovered like a fume over the winebowl. No man turned away when cups of this came round.

I brought along, and victuals in a bag, for in my bones I knew some towering brute would be upon us soon—all outward power, a wild man, ignorant of civility.

We climbed, then, briskly to the cave. But Kyklops had gone afield, to pasture his fat sheep, so we looked round at everything inside: a drying rack that sagged with cheeses, pens crowded with lambs and kids, each in its class: firstlings apart from middlings, and the 'dewdrops,' or newborn lambkins, penned apart from both. And vessels full of whey were brimming there—bowls of earthenware and pails for milking.

My men came pressing round me, pleading: 'Why not take these cheeses, get them stowed, come back, throw open all the pens, and make a run for it? We'll drive the kids and lambs aboard. We say put out again on good salt water!'

Ah, how sound that was! Yet I refused. I wished to see the caveman, what he had to offer—no pretty sight, it turned out, for my friends.
We lit a fire, burnt an offering, and took some cheese to eat; then sat in silence around the embers, waiting. When he came he had a load of dry boughs on his shoulder to stoke his fire at suppertime. He dumped it with a great crash into that hollow cave, and we all scattered fast to the far wall. Then over the broad cavern floor he ushered the ewes he meant to milk. He left his rams and he-goats in the yard outside, and swung high overhead a slab of solid rock to close the cave. Two dozen four-wheeled wagons, with heaving wagon teams, could not have stirred the tonnage of that rock from where he wedged it over the doorsill. Next he took his seat and milked his bleating ewes. A practiced job he made of it, giving each ewe her suckling; thickened his milk, then, into curds and whey, sieved out the curds to drip in withy baskets, and poured the whey to stand in bowls cooling until he drank it for his supper. When all these chores were done, he poked the fire, heaping on brushwood. In the glare he saw us. 'Strangers,' he said, 'who are you? And where from? What brings you here by sea ways—a fair traffic? Or are you wandering rogues, who cast your lives like dice, and ravage other folk by sea?' We felt a pressure on our hearts, in dread of that deep rumble and that mighty man. But all the same I spoke up in reply: 'We are from Troy, Akhaians, blown off course by shifting gales on the Great South Sea; homeward bound, but taking routes and ways uncommon; so the will of Zeus would have it. We served under Agaménon, son of Atreus—the whole world knows what city he laid waste, what armies he destroyed.'

It was our luck to come here; here we stand, beholden for your help, or any gifts you give—as custom is to honor strangers. We would entreat you, great Sir, have a care for the gods' courtesy; Zeus will avenge the unoffending guest.' He answered this from his brute chest, unmoved: 'You are a ninny, or else you come from the other end of nowhere, telling me, mind the gods! We Kyklopes care not a whistle for your thundering Zeus or all the gods in bliss; we have more force by far. I would not let you go for fear of Zeus—you or your friends—unless I had a whim to. Tell me, where was it, now, you left your ship—around the point, or down the shore, I wonder?' He thought he'd find out, but I saw through this, and answered with a ready lie: 'My ship? Poseidon Lord, who sets the earth a-tremble, broke it up on the rocks at your land's end. A wind from seaward served him, drove us there. We are survivors, these good men and I.' Neither reply nor pity came from him, but in one stride he clutched at my companions and caught two in his hands like squirming puppies to beat their brains out, spattering the floor. Then he dismembered them and made his meal, gaping and crunching like a mountain lion—everything: innards, flesh, and marrow bones. We cried aloud, lifting our hands to Zeus, powerless, looking on at this, appalled; but Kyklops went on filling up his belly with manflesh and great gulps of whey,
then lay down like a mast among his sheep.
My heart beat high now at the chance of action,
and drawing the sharp sword from my hip I went
along his flank to stab him where the midriff
holds the liver. I had touched the spot
when sudden fear stayed me: if I killed him
we perished there as well, for we could never
move his ponderous doorway slab aside.
So we were left to groan and wait for morning.
When the young Dawn with finger tips of rose
lit up the world, the Kyklops built a fire
and milked his handsome ewes, all in due order,
putting the sucklings to the mothers. Then,
his chores being all dispatched, he caught
another brace of men to make his breakfast,
and whisked away his great door slab
to let his sheep go through—but he, behind,
reset the stone as one would cap a quiver.
There was a din of whistling as the Kyklops
rounded his flock to higher ground, then stillness.
And now I pondered how to hurt him worst,
if but Athena granted what I prayed for.
Here are the means I thought would serve my turn:
a club, or staff, lay there along the fold—
an olive tree, felled green and left to season
for Kyklops' hand. And it was like a mast
a lugger of twenty oars, broad in the beam—
a deep-sea-going craft—might carry:
so long, so big around, it seemed. Now I
chopped out a six foot section of this pole
and set it down before my men, who scraped it;
and when they had it smooth, I hewed again
to make a stake with pointed end. I held this
in the fire's heart and turned it, toughening it,
then hid it, well back in the cavern, under
one of the dung piles in profusion there.
Now came the time to toss for it: who ventured
along with me? whose hand could bear to thrust
and grind that spike in Kyklops' eye, when mild
sleep had mastered him? As luck would have it,
the men I would have chosen won the toss—
four strong men, and I made five as captain.
At evening came the shepherd with his flock,
his woolly flock. The rams as well, this time,
entered the cave: by some sheep-herding whim—or a god's bidding—none were left outside.
He hefted his great boulder into place
and sat him down to milk the bleating ewes
in proper order, put the lambs to suck,
and swiftly ran through all his evening chores.
Then he caught two more men and feasted on them.
My moment was at hand, and I went forward
holding an ivy bowl of my dark drink,
looking up, saying:

'Kyklops, try some wine.
Here's liquor to wash down your scraps of men.
Taste it, and see the kind of drink we carried
under our planks. I meant it for an offering
if you would help us home. But you are mad,
unbearable, a bloody monster! After this,
will any other traveller come to see you?'

He seized and drained the bowl, and it went down
so fiery and smooth he called for more:

'Give me another, thank you kindly. Tell me,
how are you called? I'll make a gift will please you.
Even Kyklopes know the wine-grapes grow
out of grassland and loam in heaven's rain,
but here's a bit of nectar and ambrosia!'

Three bowls I brought him, and he poured them down.
I saw the fuddle and flush come over him,
then I sang out in cordial tones:

'Kyklops,
you ask my honorable name? Remember
the gift you promised me, and I shall tell you.
My name is Nohbdy: mother, father, and friends,
everyone calls me Nohbdy.'

And he said:

‘Nohbdy’s my meat, then, after I eat his friends.
Others come first. There’s a noble gift, now.’

Even as he spoke, he reeled and tumbled backward,
his great head lolling to one side: and sleep
took him like any creature. Drunk, hiccuping,
he dribbled streams of liquor and bits of men.

Now, by the gods, I drove my big hand spike
deep in the embers, charring it again,
and cheered my men along with battle talk
to keep their courage up: no quitting now.
The pike of olive, green though it had been,
reddened and glowed as if about to catch.
I drew it from the coals and my four fellows
gave me a hand, lugging it near the Kyklops
as more than natural force nerved them; straight
forward they sprinted, lifted it, and rammed it
depth in his crater eye, and I leaned on it
turning it as a shipwright turns a drill
in planking, having men below to swing
the two-handled strap that spins it in the groove.
So with our brand we bored that great eye socket
while blood ran out around the red hot bar.
Eyelid and lash were seared; the pierced ball
hissed broiling, and the roots popped.

In a smithy
one sees a white-hot axehead or an adze
plunged and wrung in a cold tub, screeching steam—
the way they make soft iron hale and hard—:
just so that eyeball hissed around the spike.
The Kyklops bellowed and the rock roared round him,
and we fell back in fear. Clawing his face

he tugged the bloody spike out of his eye,
blew it away, and his wild hands went groping;
then he set up a howl for Kyklopés
who lived in caves on windy peaks nearby.
Some heard him; and they came by divers ways
to clump around outside and call:

‘What ails you,
Polyphémus? Why do you cry so sore
in the starry night? You will not let us sleep.
Sure no man’s driving off your flock? No man
has tricked you, ruined you?’

Out of the cave
the mammoth Polyphémus roared in answer:

‘Nohbdy, Nohbdy’s tricked me, Nohbdy’s ruined me!’

To this rough shout they made a sage reply:

‘Ah well, if nobody has played you foul
there in your lonely bed, we are no use in pain
given by great Zeus. Let it be your father,
Poseidon Lord, to whom you pray.’

they trailed away. And I was filled with laughter
to see how like a charm the name deceived them.
Now Kyklops, wheezing as the pain came on him,
fumbled to wrench away the great doorstone
and squatted in the breach with arms thrown wide
for any silly beast or man who bolted—
hoping somehow I might be such a fool.
But I kept thinking how to win the game:
death sat there huge; how could we slip away?
I drew on all my wits, and ran through tactics,
reasoning as a man will for dear life,
until a trick came—and it pleased me well.
The Kyklops’ rams were handsome, fat, with heavy
fleeces, a dark violet.
I tied them silently together, twining
cords of willow from the ogre's bed;
then slung a man under each middle one
to ride there safely, shielded left and right.
So three sheep could convey each man. I took
the woolliest ram, the choicest of the flock,
and hung myself under his kinky belly,
pulled up tight, with fingers twisted deep
in sheepskin ringlets for an iron grip.
So, breathing hard, we waited until morning.

When Dawn spread out her finger tips of rose
the rams began to stir, moving for pasture,
and peals of bleating echoed round the pens
where dams with udders full called for a milking.
Blinded, and sick with pain from his head wound,
the master stroked each ram, then let it pass,
but my men riding on the pectoral fleece
the giant's blind hands blundering never found.
Last of them all my ram, the leader, came,
weighted by wool and me with my meditations.
The Kyklops patted him, and then he said:
'Sweet cousin ram, why lag behind the rest
in the night cave? You never linger so,
but graze before them all, and go afar
to crop sweet grass, and take your stately way
leading along the streams, until at evening
you run to be the first one in the fold.
Why, now, so far behind? Can you be grieving
over your Master's eye? That carrion rogue
and his accursed companions burnt it out
when he had conquered all my wits with wine.
Nobody will not get out alive, I swear.
Oh, had you brain and voice to tell
where he may be now, dodging all my fury!
Bashed by this hand and bashed on this rock wall
his brains would strew the floor, and I should have
rest from the outrage Nobody worked upon me.'

He sent us into the open, then. Close by,
I dropped and rolled clear of the ram's belly,
going this way and that to untie the men.
With many glances back, we rounded up
his fat, stiff-legged sheep to take aboard,
and drove them down to where the good ship lay.
We saw, as we came near, our fellows' faces
shining; then we saw them turn to grief
tallying those who had not fled from death.
I hushed them, jerking head and eyebrows up,
and in a low voice told them: 'Load this herd;
move fast, and put the ship's head toward the breakers.'
They all pitched in at loading, then embarked
and struck their oars into the sea. Far out,
as far off shore as shouted words would carry,
I sent a few back to the adversary:

'O Kyklops! Would you feast on my companions?
Puny, am I, in a Caveman's hands?
How do you like the beating that we gave you,
you damned cannibal? Eater of guests
under your roof! Zeus and the gods have paid you!

The blind thing in his doubled fury broke
a hilltop in his hands and heaved it after us.
Ahead of our black prow it struck and sank
whelmed in a spuming geyser, a giant wave
that washed the ship stern foremost back to shore.
I got the longest boathook out and stood
fending us off, with furious nods to all
to put their backs into a racing stroke—
row, row, or perish. So the long oars bent
kicking the foam sternward, making head
until we drew away, and twice as far.
Now when I cupped my hands I heard the crew
in low voices protesting:

'Godsake, Captain!

Why bait the beast again? Let him alone!'
That tidal wave he made on the first throw
all but beached us.'

'All but stove us in!'

'Give him our bearing with your trumpeting,
he'll get the range and lob a boulder.'

He'll smash our timbers and our heads together!

I would not heed them in my glorying spirit,
but let my anger flare and yelled:

'Aye

if ever mortal man inquire
how you were put to shame and blinded, tell him
Odysseus, raider of cities, took your eye:
Laërtès' son, whose home's on Ithaka!'

At this he gave a mighty sob and rumbled:

'Now comes the weird upon me, spoken of old.
A wizard, grand and wondrous, lived here—Télêmos,
a son of Eurymos; great length of days
he had in wizardry among the Kyklopês,
and these things he foretold for time to come:
my great eye lost, and at Odysseus' hands.
Always I had in mind some giant, armed
in giant force, would come against me here.
But this, but you—small, pitiful and twiggy—you put me down with wine, you blinded me.
Come back, Odysseus, and I'll treat you well,
praying the god of earthquake to befriend you—
his son I am, for he by his avowal
fathered me, and, if he will, he may
heal me of this black wound—he and no other
of all the happy gods or mortal men.'

Few words I shouted in reply to him:

'If I could take your life I would and take
your time away, and hurl you down to hell!
The god of earthquake could not heal you there!'

At this he stretched his hands out in his darkness
toward the sky of stars, and prayed Poseidon:

'O hear me, lord, blue girdler of the islands,
if I am thine indeed, and thou art father:
grant that Odysseus, raider of cities, never
see his home: Laërtès' son, I mean,
who kept his hall on Ithaka. Should destiny
intend that he shall see his roof again
among his family in his father land,
far be that day, and dark the years between.
Let him lose all companions, and return
under strange sail to bitter days at home.'

In these words he prayed, and the god heard him.
Now he laid hands upon a bigger stone
and wheeled around, titanic for the cast,
to let it fly in the black-prowed vessel's track.
But it fell short, just aft the steering oar,
and whelming seas rose giant above the stone
to bear us onward toward the island.

as we ran in we saw the squadron waiting,
the trim ships drawn up side by side, and all
our troubled friends who waited, looking seaward.
We beached her, grinding keel in the soft sand,
and waded in, ourselves, on the sandy beach.
Then we unloaded all the Kyklops' flock
to make division, share and share alike,
only my fighters voted that my ram,
the prize of all, should go to me. I slew him
by the sea side and burnt his long thighbones
to Zeus beyond the stormcloud, Kronos' son,
who rules the world. But Zeus disdained my offering;
destruction for my ships he had in store
and death for those who sailed them, my companions.
Now all day long until the sun went down,
we made our feast on mutton and sweet wine,
till after sunset in the gathering dark
we went to sleep above the wash of ripples.

When the young Dawn with finger tips of rose
touched the world, I roused the men, gave orders
to man the ships, cast off the mooring lines;
and filing in to sit beside the rowlocks
oarsmen in line dipped oars in the grey sea.
So we moved out, sad in the vast offing,
having our precious lives, but not our friends.