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After the War

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INVOCATION: ATHENA
for PLP

Grey-eyed Athena had no childhood.

She stepped out of the old god's terrible skull a grown young goddess
and began her apprenticeship: running sex-driven cults
among the hunters and gatherers, collecting snakes and owls,
her aegis looming behind the altars, over her priestesses,
prophetic crones and breathless temple prostitutes,
sacrificed animals bleeding and burnt ears of grain

She gained a reputation: she liked clever men,
not that way, no, but she did them favors, paid attention
to their deeds and needs and risks and wounds and wants. Her admiration
was something a clever man could count on; she would give
protection, opportunities, good luck. There was a catch, of course:
you had to be clever again, you had to keep impressing
the grey-eyed one, and so men lasted a while
but couldn't keep it up, and fell, and well, she forgot them. She was busy.

But Odysseus: He was another kind. One stratagem
after another, he built up so much credit that she saved him
even when he disgraced himself one time or another. (Olympus
might have disapproved if they'd noticed,
but she had walked far away from that rabble of archetypes,
totems, fertilities, boogeymen and witch-mothers,
nightwalkers, netherdwellers, sexpots and satyrs.
She owned her firmament.) Odysseus

was something new to her in his little flick of mortality.

So when she stood alone in Penelope's bedchamber
watching the reunion, the circling dance of man and woman

step by step negotiating what they knew after so many years
their carefulness like oil on water, leveling out
the fresh reek of murder from the great hall below them
the suitors' teeth driven into the earthen floor
Odysseus striped with their blood
Penelope before her loom, many-stringed weapon of her own warfare

weaving each other in that long rite of recognition:
Her grey eyes saw words forming and fading unsaid
As they circled in the salt red sunset Ionian air.

And saw the end of her story with Odysseus; goddess and all, it took
away her breath.
In the end she had this much to show for her years with this clever man:
He came home from the war alive, with all his teeth.

TELEMACHUS

I.

It's like this. I come to manhood at fourteen and my life's just misery and shame.

There's no King in Ithaka and my mother, the Queen, is like a prisoner. All our warriors are scattered in the sea somewhere by Athena's great storm.

Our home, the palace of godlike Odysseus, is full of parasites and pirates, We live there paralyzed, taunted by those swarming men and the people who cling to them, even some of my mother's maids, girls my age or a little older—

nasty girls who know all the ways to mock and mortify a boy squirming into manhood without a father. Of course I run away, of course I go looking for wily Odysseus, the King, my father. I never find him, it's for him to find me, later.

But I did learn to tie seamen's knots, and I have a traveler's tale: One night I was at the house of Menelaus and Helen, drinking good wine late into the night. They sent the servants to bed, and the three of us sat in the red light of the dying fire. Menelaus, still handsome with some grey in his red hair, spoke of my father Odysseus: "Do you know what he said? He said to me, we are better than the gods; we are kings. And kings must die, as the gods cannot. He said it to me when we were striding with our swords in hand through the broken gates of Troy, and as calmly as he might say it to you."

As he spoke, Menelaus of the great war-cry was fondling the arm of his wife, Helen, for whose beauty all that blood was shed. I was sitting with the people the poets sing about, as they sing about my father. I thought of one itinerant harp-thumper who sang of golden Menelaus stalking through the smoke of Troy

with his sword in front of him, looking for his traitor wife.
 Finding her he raised the bronze sword—
 Unflinching, she bared her incomparable breast to him—
 He fell to his knees, weeping with joy! O!
 My mother had that fellow
 thrown out of the house, but now—
 Seeing the two of them together, I believed it.

She was extraordinary; and in the firelight
 something showed for a moment in the shadows of her eyes,
 as white-hot as a sword blade in the forge; then it was gone
 and she was talking about something Cassandra said:
 that the gods, being immortal, could never grow up to be more than
 children;
 and now her hand was on the arm of her king, running up and down
 the sinews,
 ruffling the fine red hair in the firelight. Menelaus laughed and said,
 “But you know, they fuck and fight just like the mortal rest of us.”

How would it be, I wondered, when it was my father reconquering
 our Ithaka,
 sword in hand, coming home to my mother and to me?

2.

When the time came, I stood at his right shoulder and half a pace behind
 under the ægis of Athena which was like a grey mist
 and his arrows brought one after another of those men down:
 they crashed to the ground with their mouths wide open in rage and terror
 and their teeth ate the hard greasy dirt of our dining-hall floor as they died.
 There was a great noise in my ears that was like waves crashing on rocks
 and also like many people screaming in the grey mist.
 And my arrows followed his and found their own men to kill
 those men who had mocked and shamed me
 and tormented my mother throughout my miserable life.
 This is how I came to know my father Odysseus at last.

When the last one was dead

and his blood mingling with his rivals' blood on the floor—
it was everywhere, the blood, and the battle-filth
covered my father and me as the mist cleared—
my father, panting, grasped my arms and pulled me against his barrel chest
and kissed my face. Then he spoke hoarsely, like a lover,
saying "Who's next?"
his breath hot in my face,
and the crashing and screaming
still in my ears.

Along with that awful noise I heard another: girls crying, huddled in
the corner:
my mother's maids, the ones who were putting out for the suitors
the ones who had mocked and humiliated me, while betraying my mother.
They had come to see their men kill my father
They had seen their men shot down like rabbits instead.
Athena's grey mist was gone now; with the last breath of my lungs I
whispered "These!"
and before the word got past my teeth, my father was running at them
with a shivering laugh in his mouth and his sword out in front of him.

Twelve of them and two of us
we swung our swords
like harvesters
and kept at it
until the screaming stopped.
I was left with the crashing sound,
but that was only
my heartbeat in my ears
and it soon became quiet. In that quiet
I felt the hair rising on my arms
and rising on the back of my neck
and I knew the gods were watching me with their round, unblinking eyes.

3.

The poets tell a story to make this story nicer: my father left this
killing to me

and I ingeniously hanged the maids so no blood was spilt.
I did all twelve of them
with a single length of ship's rope that someone left lying around.
Let me tell you,
the way the poets try to explain my fancy rope-work
would make any seaman laugh out loud.

When I glanced upward from the alleyway where we killed the maids
I saw the walls of our castle painted red by the setting sun.
There was blood all around me, and as the sun went down
the walls and the blood turned as black as the black rocks at the foot
of the castle.
I stood alone in the darkness; my father had gone to find my mother.

PENELOPE

Days after Odysseus skipped out of Ithaka,
His oar on his shoulder, on some incomprehensible quest,
His queen Penelope, daughter of a sea-nymph and a Spartan king
Called out the goddess Athena.

Athena had no temple on the island, so Penelope
Found a high shelf of basalt on a hillside
Under the midmorning Ionian sun
And there she sacrificed a sheaf of barley, a length of her own weaving
White with streaks of red running along it
And a newborn lamb, its blood striping the black stone in the ocean
air.

Far-off Athenian goddess, she cried, What have you done to me?
You brought back my longago husband
Let him dance me around before my loom
Until we agreed that he was he and I was I
And let him into my ancient and anchored bed.

But he and our bloody son had murdered my poor maids.
For their weakness: giving in to my suitors.

I rejoiced, you white-eyed goddess, when he killed the suitors
I reveled in the stink of their blood all over him
When we danced our recognition before my loom,
Before the bed pinioned to bedrock,
Before the sweating and thumping reunion. O my flesh!

But O, my little maids, my girls, my little girlfriends—
What do you have to say to me, you foreign goddess?

Athena appeared to her as a woman of middle years with gray in her
hair
Walking from behind, by her left side
In Athenian dress with an owl perched on her shoulder

There on the black ledge. She said nothing.
They gazed at each other; then Athena turned and walked away
Up the hillside, vanishing around a salted and sunburnt boulder,
Leaving only the pure silent blue of the ocean sky.

Penelope tried again over the years, but Athena stayed away. She
couldn't mend
Anything she'd caused to happen; her consequences flowed in, a tide
of bloodshed
At the hands of her Odysseus and a thousand other clever murderers.

She went back to Olympus and Athens, and she gave up men.

Penelope reconciled herself to herself after many years, and built a
small shrine
To Athena
Grey-eyed
Who had after all
Saved her husband's life
For what it was worth.

ODYSSEUS

Walking away from Ithaka I felt a lightness. The goddess
had given me leave to leave it all to my queen and my son,
let them make of Ithaka what they might. I was free,
free indeed, at last, of the goddess herself. Free!
No more stunts to prove my cleverness, no more performance,
just me and my wits against the world.

It was a while before I understood: the goddess had exiled me
from my kingdom forever. From my life and the sea. O the sea!
where once I was scattered everywhere, and none could find me!

I pray to grey-eyed Athena every day and her silence strangles me.
I miss her so much, she who had no mother, who was never a girl,
Only a goddess who could save my life but nothing else. O Athena!
That light feeling floated away in the merciless blue sky.
The world fell over my eyes like darkness.
I am dark, I am heavy, I am earthbound. I am mortal.
I hear she is busy with affairs in far-off Athens: democracy.

I am old now, and I've lost one kingdom after another, after Ithaka.
I've taken up the lyre, O yes
like others with no destination but a house where someone wants to
hear a story.
Would you like to hear a story? I'll sing it to you.
Since we are friends I will confess to you,
others sing these stories better than I. I strike the lyre with my teeth
clenched and I sing like a murderer.
But you who hear me, know:
I was there
shedding blood striking blows
smashing teeth
splattering brains inside the bronze helmets of the Trojans. Not like
some fellow who has heard the story, eh?
—And so I make my living.

Whom the gods would like to forget about they first find guilty. I'm
 guilty of much,
 what would you like me to sing about?

Of course: the song Penelope demands, over and over: the murder of
 her little maids,
 how did that happen? It happened. It was momentum. Ask the other
 poets, we simply did it,
 my son and I,
 because we could, because we were kings. I sing that story
 because you asked, you know, and because my wife cursed me with it
 after the warlike thrashing and sweating in our marriage bed
 the bed that bound us down to the black basalt.

That song. I'll sing it for you. It begins

*The gods have forgotten all about me. In the end
 Odysseus King of Ithaka will just be words recited
 by others, by rote, and O, and O, without remembrance.*

Chorus (Shades of the War Dead)

*Without remembrance. The gods raised Odysseus into
 the sky of stars because they had to, but by Athena's
 will he is not revealed. No one knows where to find him
 among the million pinprick lights where he is scattered,
 that clever man Odysseus.*

HYMN TO ATHENA

(Missionary organ, gospel choir, jazz trio, & village band)

Grey Eyes

In my dream I stand before you naked, you in half-armor,
greaves and war-belt and your owlsh helmet,
bare-breasted in the chill cavern under your altar—
I feel the cold softness on my skin

Let me take this moment to sing to you alone
in my own voice—

O Skull-Born

What was it like for the old god, I wonder, what was it like
when you finally burst through his knotted forehead
scattering marbley bone-shards and ichor?
Was it like the passing of an eternal migraine,
the dazzle fading and the pain subsiding,
seeing a strange and luminous female creature
walking away, not looking back?
Or was there maybe nothing left inside that husk of skull
but dust and beetles,
after your centuries of all-consuming
terrible gestation?
I'm just wondering, Grey Eyes

And I wonder what it was that drew you
toward mortals. Was it the smell of death?
That whiff that shrouds each man and woman
from our first squalling breath until the last?
Grey Eyes, were you fascinated? All those pointless, beautiful
sparks of human life winking like fireflies, here and gone—
did you hug yourself and suck your breath
at so much life and death
and did you foment war
to see some more?
And when did immortality

begin to reach out groping for the jewel of death?
 Long before
 the Trojan War
 I'm sure

And long, long after the squandering of all those men
 long after the women enslaved and raped were dead
 and the revenge fires burnt low around the world
 and we began to make the bronze swords into cookpots
 and distant children wondered what it meant to be a hero—
 Did you win your prize at last, by so much rubbing up
 against our mortalness?
 The holy prize, Grey Eyes
 the highest high
 to grow old and to die?

Is there
 somewhere
 in Greece or Anatolia, or it might be anywhere
 a heap of stones
 pissed on by dogs but marking still a cavity beneath
 with a jar of long tall bones
 and some shreds of greyish stuff—
 owl and snake images scratched on the walls
 by whoever it was that washed the crazy woman's body—
 is that you, Grey Eyes? I'm just wondering—

Or is this you I find alive, haunted and haunting this ancient human
 landscape
 like the shade of a glacier gone from ice to ashes?
 So many questions, Grey Eyes! I'm just asking. Never mind.

I will remember you, Grey Eyes
 wander and waltz with you, Grey Eyes
 love you forever—
 We who are mortal and true
 We who will die and be gone

We love you forever, Grey Eyes
This song
is for you

EPILOGUE: NAUSICAA

Far and far away is Phaiakia, my home.

Pure blue is the sky, we sing, and green the hillside,

White are the lambs and yellow the corn,

Black are the rocks of our harbor,

Red runs our blood!

Here my ancestors, fleeing monsters or gods,

Burned their ships on the beach.

I am named Ship Burner after those ancestors

Who would neither go back, nor any farther.

We are a lonely race on this island. A ship comes

Two or three times a year, no more. We see it coming,

Reaching along the cliffs before entering our harbor

The people thronging to the harbor

To help haul the hollow hull up onto the beach.

My father's messenger comes to invite the captain

To our great hall for dinner, and he is to bring

Any of his passengers or crew who might have a story, for we
love stories here.

Odysseus did not come in this manner.

When I was very young, a thin girl

Scarcely touched by the moon

The ancient goddess came to me

In the cold hours before dawn.

She was wrapped in a grey mist

As grey as her grey eyes

And over her shoulders, with a lazy turn around her neck, a serpent

And flitting out of the mist and back again

A small owl. I shivered in terror.

The mist surrounded me and I was with her in the mist

And the mist was cold on my arms

The goddess spoke to me in the most ordinary voice

And said I am Pallas Athene, daughter of the skull of Zeus
And of no mother. Good morning, daughter of this island,
I have work for you.

Really, that's what she said!
I said Yes, Lady—stumbling and shivering I said, Yes, Pallas,
And realized I was staring at her in a rude way;
I dropped my eyes and said Yes, Goddess.
And she said, This morning, go with the maids
Down to the water, and wash the laundry with them.
I will show you something.
And I was in my bed shivering in the chill before the sunrise
Clutching the sheets and blankets in my fists
Before I woke again.

Well, everybody's heard this part before:
While we were washing clothes, O
A naked man stepped out of the bushes!
The girls all ran away and left me with him.
It's not that I'd never seen a naked man,
Only that I'd never seen a man like this one.
This was Odysseus.

And as you know, I gave him clothing
And I almost sent him to the King my father
But I thought again and sent him to my mother,
Who is wiser. And so it happened
That Odysseus stayed with us for some time
And night after night around the dinner table
My girl's heart grew to womanhood, hearing his story.

His true story, and he told it exactly.
Parts of it had fallen into verse, and he borrowed a lyre
And sang them out in a clear strong voice, the words
Dancing like the sea. The rest was spoken quietly
Along the straight line of a true story, and the words rippled.
And my heart rose and fell.

But the goddess whispered to me as I fell asleep
He's not for you, no, though your father will offer you to him.
And the grey mist gathered itself around us
And though I shivered
I was warmed.

Not for me, I thought, and went to sleep—

Not for me.

Yet I am branded forever with the brilliance of that man
Like the sun glancing white off the wine-blue sea
The curled power in his limbs
His eyes that looked at me—

And now when I give myself over
To remembering Odysseus as I fall asleep
I hear the ancient goddess whispering:

— *I know*

CHORUS (SEABIRDS OVER PHAIAKIA):

*Thousands of lifetimes rustle in the sigh of the virgin goddess
Remembering Odysseus, scattered in stars, in the dancing sea
And the king's daughter remembers the naked man from the
river*

His voice rising and falling and her heart in ripples: Odysseus.

*Yet this is not his story, nor even the story of his
Half-mortal queen Penelope with her loom a-weaving
Stories against stories, nor even the story of spilt blood smok-
ing*

In the red sunset of guilty Ithaka.

*This is the story of how skull-born Athena, with her snakes
and owls,*

*Her scarred, stained soul of dust and caverns, came to weep
At the breast of the girl princess of Phaiakia, where, perhaps,
Even she might find a moment's peace.*

*Brief is this moment in a young life, tiny her island in the
wine-black sea*

pure blue is the sky

and green the hillside

white are the lambs and yellow the corn

black are the rocks in the harbor

red runs the blood.

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