HOMER

The Iliad

TRANSLATED BY
Robert Fagles

INTRODUCTION AND
NOTES BY
BERNARD KNOX

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To the memory of my father and my mother
and for Lynne, Katya and Nina—

humeis gar theai este, pareste te, iste te panta,
hêmeis de kleos oion akouomen oude ti idmen—

enough to wet his lips, not quench his thirst.
But then some bully with both his parents living
beats him from the banquet, fists and abuses flying:
'You, get out—you've got no father feasting with us here!'
And the boy, sobbing, trails home to his widowed mother . . .
Astyanax!
And years ago, propped on his father's knee,
he would only eat the marrow, the richest cuts of lamb,
and when sleep came on him and he had quit his play,
cradled warm in his nurse's arms he'd drowse off,
snug in a soft bed, his heart brimmed with joy.
Now what suffering, now he's lost his father—
Astyanax!
The Lord of the City, so the Trojans called him,
because it was you, Hector, you and you alone
who shielded the gates and the long walls of Troy.
But now by the beaked ships, far from your parents,
glistening worms will wriggle through your flesh,
once the dogs have had their fill of your naked corpse—
though we have such stores of clothing laid up in the halls,
fine things, a joy to the eye, the work of women's hands.
Now, by god, I'll burn them all, blazing to the skies!
No use to you now, they'll never shroud your body—
but they will be your glory
burned by the Trojan men and women in your honor!"

Her voice rang out in tears and the women wailed in answer.

BOOK TWENTY-THREE

Funeral Games for Patroclus

So they grieved at Troy while Achaea's troops pulled back.
Once they reached the warships moored at the Hellespont
the contingents scattered, each man to his own ship,
but Achilles still would not dismiss his Myrmidons,
he gave his battle-loving comrades strict commands:
"Charioteers in fast formation—friends to the death!
We must not loose our teams from the war-cars yet.
All in battle-order drive them past Patroclus—
a cortege will mourn the man with teams and chariots.
These are the solemn honors owed the dead. And then,
after we've eased our hearts with tears and dirge,
we free the teams and all take supper here."
All as one
the armies cried out in sorrow, and Achilles led the chant.
Three times they drove their full-maned stallions round the body,

Myrmidon soldiers mourning, and among them Thetis stirred
a deep desire to grieve. And the sands grew wet,
the armor of fighting men grew wet with tears,
such bitter longing he roused . . .
Patroclus, that terror who routed Trojans headlong.
Achilles led them now in a throbbing chant of sorrow,
laying his man-killing hands on his great friend's chest:
"Farewell, Patroclus, even there in the House of Death!
Look—all that I promised once I am performing now:
I've dragged Hector here for the dogs to rip him raw—
and here in front of your flaming pyre I'll cut the throats
of a dozen sons of Troy in all their shining glory,
venting my rage on them for your destruction!"
So he triumphed
and again he was bent on outrage, on shaming noble Hector—
he flung him facedown in the dust beside Patroclus' bier.
And down to the last unit all eased off their armor,
fine burnished bronze, and released their neighing teams
and took their seats by the swift runner Achilles' ship,
Myrmidons in their thousands, and he set before them all
a handsome funeral feast to meet their hearts' desire.
And many pale-white oxen sank on the iron knife,
gasping in slaughter, many sheep and bleating goats
and droves of swine with their long glinting tusks,
succulent, rich with fat. They singed the bristles,
splaying the porkers out across Hephaestus' fire
then poured the blood in cupfuls all around the corpse.

But now their commander, swift Achilles was led away
by Achaea's kings, barely able to bring him round—
still raging for his friend—to feast with Agamemnon.
As soon as the party reached the warlord's tents
they ordered the clear-voiced heralds straightaway
to set a large three-legged cauldron over the fire,
still in hopes of inducing Peleus' royal son
to wash the clotted bloodstains from his body.
He spurned their offer, firmly, even swore an oath:
"No, no, by Zeus—by the highest, greatest god!

It's sacrilege for a single drop to touch my head
till I place Patroclus on his pyre and heap his mound
and cut my hair for him—for a second grief this harsh
will never touch my heart while I am still among the living . . .
But now let us consent to the feasting that I loathe.
And at daybreak, marshal Agamemnon, rouse your troops
to fell and haul in timber, and furnish all that's fitting,
all the dead man needs for his journey down the western dark.
Then, by heaven, the tireless fire can strike his corpse—
the sooner to burn Patroclus from our sight—
and the men turn back to battles they must wage."

So he insisted. They hung on his words, complied,
rushed to prepare the meal, and each man feasted well
and no man's hunger lacked a share of the banquet.
When they had put aside desire for food and drink
each went his way and slept in his own shelter.
But along the shore as battle lines of breakers
crashed and dragged, Achilles lay down now,
groaning deep from the heart,
near his Myrmidon force but alone on open ground
where over and over rollers washed along the shore.
No sooner had sleep caught him, dissolving all his grief
as mists of refreshing slumber poured around him there—
his powerful frame was bone-weary from charging Hector
straight and hard to the walls of windswept Troy—
than the ghost of stricken Patroclus drifted up . . .
He was like the man to the life, every feature,
the same tall build and the fine eyes and voice
and the very robes that used to clothe his body.
Hovering at his head the phantom rose and spoke:
"Sleeping, Achilles? You've forgotten me, my friend.
You never neglected me in life, only now in death.
Bury me, quickly—let me pass the Gates of Hades.
They hold me off at a distance, all the souls,
the shades of the burnt-out, breathless dead,
never to let me cross the river, mingle with them . . .
They leave me to wander up and down, abandoned, lost

at the House of Death with the all-embracing gates.
Oh give me your hand—I beg you with my tears!
Never, never again shall I return from Hades
once you have given me the soothing rites of fire.
Never again will you and I, alive and breathing,
huddle side-by-side, apart from loyal comrades,
making plans together—never . . . Grim death,
that death assigned from the day that I was born
has spread its hateful jaws to take me down.
And you too,
your fate awaits you too, godlike as you are, Achilles—
to die in battle beneath the proud rich Trojans' walls!
But one thing more. A last request—grant it, please.
Never bury my bones apart from yours, Achilles,
let them lie together . . .
just as we grew up together in your house,
after Menoetius brought me there from Opois,
and only a boy, but banished for bloody murder
the day I killed Amphidamas' son. I was a fool—
I never meant to kill him—quarreling over a dice game.
Then the famous horseman Peleus took me into his halls,
he reared me with kindness, appointed me your aide.
So now let a single urn, the gold two-handled urn
your noble mother gave you, hold our bones—together!"

And the swift runner Achilles reassured him warmly:
"Why have you returned to me here, dear brother, friend?
Why tell me of all that I must do? I'll do it all.
I will obey you, your demands. Oh come closer!
Throw our arms around each other, just for a moment—
take some joy in the tears that numb the heart!"

In the same breath he stretched his loving arms
but could not seize him, no, the ghost slipped underground
like a wisp of smoke . . . with a high thin cry.
And Achilles sprang up with a start and staring wide,
drove his fists together and cried in desolation, "Ah god!
So even in Death's strong house there is something left,

a ghost, a phantom—true, but no real breath of life.
All night long the ghost of stricken Patroclus
hovered over me, grieving, sharing warm tears,
telling me, point by point, what I must do.
Marvelous—like the man to the life!"
So he cried
and his outcry stirred in them all a deep desire to grieve,
and Dawn with her rose-red fingers shone upon them weeping
round the wretched corpse. At daybreak King Agamemnon
ordered parties of men and mules to haul in timber,
pouring from the tents with a good man in charge,
the lordly Idomeneus' aide-in-arms Meriones.
The troops moved out with loggers' axes in hand
and sturdy cabled ropes as mules trudged on ahead.
Uphill, downhill, crisscross, zigzag on they tramped
and once they reached the slopes of Ida with all her springs,
quickly pitching themselves at towering, leaf-crowned oaks,
they put their backs into strokes of the whetted bronze axes
and huge trunks came crashing down. They split them apart,
lashed the logs to the mules and their hoofs tore up the earth,
dragging them down to level ground through dense brush.
And all the woodcutters hoisted logs themselves—
by command of Idomeneus' good aide Meriones—
and they heaved them down in rows along the beach
at the site Achilles chose to build an immense mound
for Patroclus and himself.
With boundless timber piled
on all sides of the place, down they sat, waiting, massed.
And at once Achilles called his Myrmidons keen for battle:
"Belt yourselves in bronze! Each driver yoke his team!
Chariots harnessed!" Up they rose and strapped on armor
and swung aboard the war-cars, drivers, fighters beside them—
and the horse moved out in front, behind came clouds of infantry,
men by thousands, and in their midst his comrades bore Patroclus.
They covered his whole body deep with locks of hair they cut
and cast upon him, and just behind them brilliant Achilles
held the head, in tears—this was his steadfast friend
whom he escorted down to the House of Death.

When they reached the site Achilles had pointed out
they laid Patroclus down and swiftly built his body
a fitting height of timber.
And now the great runner remembered one more duty.
Stepping back from the pyre he cut the red-gold lock
he'd let grow long as a gift to the river god Spercheus—
scanning the wine-dark sea he prayed in anguish, "Spercheus!
All in vain my father Peleus vowed to you that there,
once I had journeyed home to my own dear fatherland,
I'd cut this lock for you and offer splendid victims,
dedicate fifty young ungelded rams to your springs,
there at the spot where your grove and smoking altar stand!
So the old king vowed—but you've destroyed his hopes.
Now, since I shall not return to my fatherland,
I'd give my friend this lock . . .
and let the hero Patroclus bear it on his way."
With that,
Achilles placed the lock in his dear comrade's hands
and stirred in the men again a deep desire to grieve.
And now the sunlight would have set upon their tears
if Achilles had not turned to Agamemnon quickly:
"Atrides—you are the first the armies will obey.
Even of sorrow men can have their fill. So now
dismiss them from the pyre, have them prepare
an evening meal. We are the closest to the dead,
we'll see to all things here.
But I'd like the leading captains to remain."

Hearing his wish, the lord of men Agamemnon
dismissed the troops at once to the balanced ships.
But the chief mourners stayed in place, piled timber
and built a pyre a hundred feet in length and breadth
and aloft it laid the corpse with heavy, aching hearts.
And droves of fat sheep and shambling crook-horned cattle
they led before the pyre, skinned and dressed them well.
And the greathearted Achilles, flensing fat from all,
wrapped the corpse with folds of it, head to foot,
then heaped the flayed carcasses round Patroclus.

He set two-handled jars of honey and oil beside him,
leaned them against the bier—and then with wild zeal
slung the bodies of four massive stallions onto the pyre
and gave a wrenching groan. And the dead lord Patroclus
had fed nine dogs at table—he slit the throats of two,
threw them onto the pyre and then a dozen brave sons
of the proud Trojans he hacked to pieces with his bronze . . .
Achilles' mighty heart was erupting now with slaughter—
he loosed the iron rage of fire to consume them all
and cried out, calling his dear friend by name,
"Farewell, Patroclus, even there in the House of Death!
All that I promised once I have performed at last.
Here are twelve brave sons of the proud Trojans—
all, the fire that feeds on you devours them all
but not Hector the royal son of Priam, Hector
I will never give to the hungry flames—
wild dogs will bolt his flesh!"
So he threatened
but the dogs were not about to feed on Hector.
Aphrodite daughter of Zeus beat off the packs,
day and night, anointing Hector's body with oil,
ambrosial oil of roses, so Achilles could not rip
the prince's skin as he dragged him back and forth.
And round him Phoebus Apollo brought a dark cloud down
from high sky to the plain to shroud the entire space
where Hector's body lay, before the sun's white fury
could sear away his flesh, his limbs and sinews.

But the pyre of dead Patroclus was not burning—
and the swift runner Achilles thought of what to do.
Stepping back from the pyre he prayed to the two winds—
Zephyr and Boreas, West and North—promised splendid victims
and pouring generous, brimming cups from a golden goblet,
begged them to come, so the wood might burst in flame
and the dead burn down to ash with all good speed.
And Iris, hearing his prayers, rushed the message on
to the winds that gathered now in stormy Zephyr's halls
to share his brawling banquet. Iris swept to a stop

and once they saw her poised at the stone threshold
all sprang up, each urged her to sit beside him
but she refused, pressing on with her message:
"No time for sitting now. No, I must return
to the Ocean's running stream, the Aethiopians' land.
They are making a splendid sacrifice to the gods—
I must not miss my share of the sacred feast.
But I bring Achilles' prayers!
He begs you to come at once, Boreas, blustering Zephyr,
he promises splendid victims—come with a strong blast
and light the pyre where Patroclus lies in state
and all the Argive armies mourn around him!"

Message delivered, off she sped as the winds rose
with a superhuman roar, stampeding clouds before them.
Suddenly reaching the open sea in gale force,
whipping whitecaps under a shrilling killer-squall
they raised the good rich soil of Troy and struck the pyre
and a huge inhuman blaze went howling up the skies.
All night long they hurled the flames—massed on the pyre,
blast on screaming blast—and all night long the swift Achilles,
lifting a two-handled cup, dipped wine from a golden bowl
and poured it down on the ground and drenched the earth,
calling out to the ghost of stricken, gaunt Patroclus.
As a father weeps when he burns his son's bones,
dead on his wedding day,
and his death has plunged his parents in despair . . .
so Achilles wept as he burned his dear friend's bones,
dragging himself around the pyre, choked with sobs.

At that hour the morning star comes rising up
to herald a new day on earth, and riding in its wake
the Dawn flings out her golden robe across the sea,
the funeral fires sank low, the flames died down.
And the winds swung round and headed home again,
over the Thracian Sea, and the heaving swells moaned.
And at last Achilles, turning away from the corpse-fire,
sank down, exhausted. Sweet sleep overwhelmed him.

But Agamemnon's followers grouped together now
and as they approached Achilles
the din and trampling of their feet awoke him.
He sat up with a start and made his wishes known:
"Atrides—chiefs of Achaea's united forces—
first put out the fires with glistening wine,
wherever the flames still burn in all their fury.
Then let us collect the bones of Menoetius' son Patroclus,
pick them out with care—but they cannot be mistaken:
he lay amidst the pyre, apart from all the others
burned at the edge, the ruck of men and horses.
Then let us place his bones in a golden urn,
sealed tight and dry with a double fold of fat,
till I myself lie hid in the strong House of Death.
For his barrow, build him nothing large, I ask you,
something right for the moment. And then, later,
Achaeans can work to make it broad and lofty,
all who survive me here,
alive in the benched ships when I am gone."

And the men obeyed the swift runner's orders.
They first put out the fires with glistening wine,
far as the flames had spread and the ashes bedded deep.
In tears they gathered their gentle comrade's white bones,
all in a golden urn, sealed with a double fold of fat,
and stowed the urn in his shelter, covered well
with a light linen shroud, then laid his barrow out.
Around the pyre they planted a ring of stone revetments,
piled the loose earth high in a mound above the ring
and once they'd heaped the barrow turned to leave.
But Achilles held the armies on the spot.
He had them sit in a great and growing circle—
now for funeral games—and brought from his ships
the trophies for the contests: cauldrons and tripods,
stallions, mules and cattle with massive heads,
women sashed and lovely, and gleaming gray iron.
First,
for the fastest charioteers he set out glittering prizes:

a woman to lead away, flawless, skilled in crafts,
and a two-eared tripod, twenty-two measures deep—
all that for the first prize.
Then for the runner-up he brought forth a mare,
unbroken, six years old, with a mule foal in her womb.
For the third he produced a fine four-measure cauldron
never scorched by flames, its sheen as bright as new.
For the fourth he set out two gold bars, for the fifth,
untouched by fire as well, a good two-handled jar.
And he rose up tall and challenged all the Argives:
"Atrides—Achaeans-at-arms! Let the games begin!
The trophies lie afield—they await the charioteers.
If we held our games now in another hero's honor,
surely I'd walk off to my tent with first prize.
You know how my team outstrips all others' speed.
Immortal horses they are, Poseidon gave them himself
to my father Peleus, Peleus passed them on to me.
But I and our fast stallions will not race today,
so strong his fame, the charioteer they've lost,
so kind—always washing them down with fresh water,
sleeking their long manes with smooth olive oil.
No wonder they stand here, mourning . . .
look, trailing those very manes along the ground.
They both refuse to move, saddled down with grief.
But all the rest of you, come, all Achaeans in camp
who trust to your teams and bolted chariots—
take your places now!"
Achilles' call rang out
and it brought the fastest drivers crowding forward.
The first by far, Eumelus lord of men sprang up,
Admetus' prized son who excelled in horsemanship
and following him Tydides, powerful Diomedes,
yoking the breed of Tros he'd wrested from Aeneas
just the other day when Apollo saved their master.
Then Atreus' son Menelaus, the red-haired captain
born of the gods, leading under the yoke his racers,
Blaze, Agamemnon's mare, and his own stallion Brightfoot.
Anchises' son Echepolus gave Agamemnon Blaze,

a gift that bought him off from the king's armies
bound for windy Troy: he'd stay right where he was,
a happy man, since Zeus had given him vast wealth
and he lived in style on Sicyon's broad dancing rings.
His was the mare Atrides harnessed, champing for the race.
And the fourth to yoke his full-maned team was Antilochus,
the splendid son of Nestor the old high-hearted king,
lord Neleus' offspring. A team of Pylian purebreds
drew his chariot. His father stood at his side,
lending sound advice to the boy's own good sense:
"Young as you are, Antilochus, how the gods have loved you!
Zeus and Poseidon taught you horsemanship, every sort,
so there's no great need for me to set you straight.
Well you know how to double round the post . . .
but you've got the slowest nags—a handicap, I'd say.
Yet even if other teams are faster, look at their drivers:
there's not a trick in their whips that you don't have at hand.
So plan your attack, my friend, muster all your skills
or watch the prize slip by!
It's skill, not brawn, that makes the finest woodsman.
By skill, too, the captain holds his ship on course,
scudding the wine-dark sea though rocked by gales.
By skill alone, charioteer outraces charioteer.
The average driver, leaving all to team and car,
recklessly makes his turn, veering left and right,
his pair swerving over the course—he can't control them.
But the cunning driver, even handling slower horses,
always watches the post, turns it close, never loses
the first chance to relax his reins and stretch his pair
but he holds them tight till then, eyes on the leader.
Now, the turn itself—it's clear, you cannot miss it.
There's a dead tree-stump standing six feet high,
it's oak or pine, not rotted through by the rains,
and it's propped by two white stones on either side.
That's your halfway mark where the homestretch starts
and there's plenty of good smooth racing-room around it—
it's either the grave-mound of a man dead long ago
or men who lived before us set it up as a goal.

Now, in any event, swift Achilles makes it
his turning-post. And you must hug it close
as you haul your team and chariot round but you
in your tight-strung car, you lean to the left yourself,
just a bit as you whip your right-hand horse, hard,
shout him on, slacken your grip and give him rein.
But make your left horse hug that post so close
the hub of your well-turned wheel will almost seem
to scrape the rock—just careful not to graze it!
You'll maim your team, you'll smash your car to pieces.
A joy to your rivals, rank disgrace to yourself . . .
So keep your head, my boy, be on the lookout.
Trail the field out but pass them all at the post,
no one can catch you then or overtake you with a surge—
not if the man behind you were driving huge Arion,
Adrastus' lightning stallion sired by the gods,
or Laomedon's team, the greatest bred in Troy."

Nestor sat down again. He'd shown his son the ropes,
the last word in the master horseman's skills.

Now after Meriones yoked his sleek horses fifth,
they boarded their cars and dropped lots in a helmet.
Achilles shook it hard—Antilochus' lot leapt out
so he drew the inside track.
Next in the draw came hardy lord Eumelus,
Atrides Menelaus the famous spearman next
and Meriones drew the fourth starting-lane
and Tydides Diomedes drew the fifth and last,
the best of them all by far at driving battle-teams.
All pulled up abreast as Achilles pointed out the post,
far off on the level plain, and stationed there beside it
an umpire, old lord Phoenix, his father's aide-in-arms,
to mark the field at the turn and make a true report.

Ready—
whips raised high—
at the signal all together

lashed their horses' backs and shouted, urging them on—
they broke in a burst of speed, in no time swept the plain,
leaving the ships behind and lifting under their chests
the dust clung to the teams like clouds or swirling gales
as their manes went streaming back in the gusty tearing wind.
The cars shot on, now jouncing along the earth that rears us all,
now bounding clear in the air but the drivers kept erect
in the lurching cars and the heart of each man raced,
straining for victory—each man yelled at his pair
as they flew across the plain in a whirl of dust.
But just out of the turn,
starting the homestretch back to sunlit sea
the horses lunged, each driver showed his form,
the whole field went racing full tilt and at once
the fast mares of Eumelus surged far out in front—
And after him came Diomedes' team, Tros's stallions
hardly a length behind now, closing at each stride
and at any moment it seemed they'd mount Eumelus' car,
their hot breath steaming his back and broad shoulders,
their heads hovering over him, breakneck on they flew—
and now he'd have passed him or forced a dead heat
if Apollo all of a sudden raging at Diomedes
had not knocked the shining whip from his fist.
Tears of rage came streaming down his cheeks
as he watched Eumelus' mares pulling farther ahead
and his team losing pace, no whip to lash them on . . .
But Athena, missing nothing of Phoebus' foul play
that robbed Diomedes, sped to the gallant captain,
handed him back his whip, primed his team with power
and flying after Admetus' son in full immortal fury
the goddess smashed his yoke. His mares bolted apart,
careening off the track and his pole plowed the ground
and Eumelus hurled from the chariot, tumbling over the wheel,
the skin was ripped from his elbows, mouth and nostrils,
his forehead battered in, scraped raw at the brows,
tears filling his eyes, his booming voice choked—
But veering round the wreck Diomedes steered his racers
shooting far ahead of the rest, leaving them in the dust

as Athena fired his team and gave the man his glory.
And after him came Atrides, red-haired Menelaus,
next Antilochus, urging his father's horses:
"Drive, the two of you—full stretch and fast!
I don't tell you to match the leader's speed,
skilled Diomedes' team—look, Athena herself
just fired their pace and gave their master glory.
But catch Menelaus' pair—fast—don't get left behind—
or Blaze will shower the two of you with disgrace—
Blaze is a mare! Why falling back, my brave ones?
I warn you both—so help me it's the truth—
no more grooming for you at Nestor's hands!
The old driver will slaughter you on the spot
with a sharp bronze blade if you slack off now
and we take a lesser prize. After them, faster—
full gallop—I'll find the way, I've got the skill
to slip past him there where the track narrows—
I'll never miss my chance!"
Whipped with fear
by their master's threats they put on a fresh burst
for a length or two but suddenly brave Antilochus
saw the narrow place where the road washed out—
a sharp dip in the land where massing winter rains
broke off the edge, making it all one sunken rut.
There Atrides was heading—no room for two abreast—
but Antilochus swerved to pass him, lashing his horses
off the track then swerving into him neck-and-neck
and Atrides, frightened, yelled out at the man,
"Antilochus—you drive like a maniac! Hold your horses!
The track's too narrow here—it widens soon for passing—
watch out—you'll crash your chariot, wreck us both!"

So he cried but Antilochus drove on all the wilder,
cracking his lash for more speed like a man stone deaf.
As far as a full shoulder-throw of a whirling discus
hurled by a young contender testing out his strength,
so far they raced dead even. But then Menelaus' pair
dropped back as he yielded, cut the pace on purpose—

he feared the massive teams would collide on the track
and the tight-strung cars capsize, the men themselves
go sprawling into the dust, striving, wild for triumph.
As his rival passed the red-haired captain cursed him:
"Antilochus—no one alive more treacherous than you!
Away with you, madman—damn you!
How wrong we were when we said you had good sense.
You'll never take the prize unless you take the oath!"

Turning back to his team, calling, shouting them on:
"Don't hold back, don't stop now—galled as you are—
that team in the lead will sag in the leg before you—
robbed of their prime, their racing days are done!"
And lashed with fear by their master's angry voice
they put on a surge, closing on them fast.
And all the while
the armies tense in a broad circle watched for horses
flying back on the plain in a rising whirl of dust.
The first to make them out was the Cretan captain.
Idomeneus sat perched on a rise outside the ring,
a commanding lookout point, and hearing a driver
shouting out in the distance, recognized the voice,
could see a stallion too—far in the lead, unmistakable—
a big chestnut beauty, all but the blaze he sported
stark white on his forehead, round as a full moon.
He sprang to his feet, calling down to cohorts,
"Friends—lords of the Argives, O my captains—
am I the only one who can spot that pair
or can you see them too?
Seems to me it's a new team out in front,
a new driver as well, just coming into sight.
The mares of Eumelus must have come to grief,
somewhere downfield—they led on the way out.
I saw them heading first for the turn, by god,
but I can't find them now—anywhere—hard as I look,
left and right, scanning the whole Trojan plain.
He lost his reins, he lost control of his horses
round the post and they failed to make the turn—

that's where he got thrown, I'd say, his chariot smashed
and his horses went berserk and bolted off.
Stand up,
look for yourselves! I can't make them out . . .
not for certain, no, but the leader seems to me
an Aetolian man by birth—he's king of the Argives,
horse-breaking Tydeus' son, rugged Diomedes!"

But quick Little Ajax rounded on him roughly:
"Loose talk, Idomeneus—why are you always sounding off?
They still have a way to go out there, those racing teams.
You too, you're a far cry from the youngest Argive here,
nor are the eyes in your head our sharpest scouts
but you're always blustering, you, you foul-mouthed—
why must we have you blurting out this way
in the face of keener men?
Those mares in front are the same that led before—
they're Eumelus' mares, look, and there's Eumelus now,
astride his chariot, gripping the reins himself!"

But the Cretan captain burst back in answer,
"Ajax, champion wrangler in all the ranks! Stupid too,
first and last the worst man in the Argive armies—
stubborn, bullnecked fool. Come now,
let's both put up a tripod or a cauldron,
wager which horses are really out in front
and we'll make Atrides Agamemnon our referee—
you'll learn, don't worry, once you pay the price!"

Ajax rose in fury to trade him taunt for taunt,
and now the two of them might have come to blows
if Achilles himself had not stood up to calm them:
"Enough! No more trading your stinging insults now,
Ajax, Idomeneus! It's offensive—this is not the time.
You'd be the first to blame a man who railed this way.
Sit down in the ring, you two, and watch the horses—
they'll be home in a moment, racing hard to win.
Then each can see for himself who comes in second,

who takes off first prize."
In the same breath
Diomedes came on storming toward them—closer, look,
closing—lashing his team nonstop, full-shoulder strokes,
making them kick high as they hurtled toward the goal.
Constant sprays of dust kept pelting back on the driver,
the chariot sheathed in gold and tin careering on
in the plunging stallions' wake, its spinning rims
hardly leaving a rut behind in the thin dust
as the team thundered in—a whirlwind finish!
He reined them back in the ring with drenching sweat,
lather streaming down to the ground from necks and chests.
Their master leapt down from the bright burnished car,
propped his whip on the yoke. His aide lost no time—
the hardy Sthenelus rushed to collect the prizes,
gave their proud troops the woman to lead away
and they carried off the handsome two-eared tripod
as he was loosing the horses from the harness . . .

Antilochus next—the son of Nestor drove in second,
beating Atrides not by speed but cunning—
but still Menelaus kept his racers close behind.
Tight as the closing gap between the wheel and horse
when he hauls his master's car top speed across the flats,
the very tip of his tail brushing the running-rim
and the wheel spins closer, hardly a gap between
as he sweeps the open plain—that much, no more,
Menelaus trailed Antilochus, dauntless driver.
At first he'd trailed him a full discus-throw
but now he was closing, gaining on him fast—
yes, Blaze with all her fury and flowing mane,
Agamemnon's mare was coming on with a strong surge
and now if the two teams had a longer course to run
Menelaus would have passed him—no dead heat about it.
Then Idomeneus' good aide Meriones came in fourth,
trailing the famed Atrides by a spear-throw.
His team had sleek manes but the slowest pace afield
and the man himself was the poorest racing-driver.

But Admetus' son Eumelus came in last of all . . .
dragging his fine chariot, flogging his team before him.
Seeing him there the swift Achilles filled with pity,
rose in their midst and said these winging words:
"The best man drives his purebred team home last!
Come, let's give him a prize, it's only right—
but second prize, of course—
Tydeus' son must carry off the first."
So he said
and the armies called assent to what he urged.
And now, spurred by his comrades' quick approval,
Achilles was just about to give the man the mare
when Antilochus, son of magnanimous old Nestor,
leapt to his feet and lodged a formal protest:
"Achilles—I'll be furious if you carry out that plan!
Do you really mean to strip me of my prize?—
so concerned that his team and car were wrecked,
and the fellow too, for all his racing skills.
Why, he should have prayed to the deathless gods!
Then he would never have finished last of all.
You pity the man? You're fond of him, are you?
You have hoards of gold in your tents, bronze, sheep,
serving-girls by the score and purebred racers too:
pick some bigger trophy out of the whole lot
and hand it on to the man, but do it later—
or now, at once, and win your troops' applause.
I won't give up the mare! The one who wants her—
step this way and try—
he'll have to fight me for her with his fists!"

He flared up and the swift runner Achilles smiled,
delighting in Antilochus—he liked the man immensely.
He answered him warmly, winged words: "Antilochus,
you want me to fetch an extra gift from my tents,
a consolation prize for Eumelus? I'm glad to do it.
I'll give him the breastplate I took from Asteropaeus.
It's solid bronze with a glittering overlay of tin,
rings on rings. A gift he'll value highly."

He asked Automedon, ready aide, to bring
the breastplate from his tents. He went and brought it,
handed it to Eumelus. The man received it gladly.

But now Menelaus rose, his heart smoldering,
still holding a stubborn grudge against Antilochus.
A crier put a staff in his hands and called for silence.
And with all his royal weight Atrides thundered, "Antilochus—
you used to have good sense! Now see what you've done!
Disgraced my horsemanship—you've fouled my horses,
cutting before me, you with your far slower team.
Quickly, lords of the Argives, all my captains,
judge between us—impartially, no favoritism—
so none of our bronze-armed men can ever say,
'Only with lies did Atrides beat Antilochus out
and walk off with the mare—his team was far slower
but the king's own rank and power took the prize!'
Wait, I'll settle things myself. I have no fear
that any Achaean will accuse me: I'll be fair.
Come over here, Antilochus, royal prince—
this is the old custom. Come, stand in front
of your team and chariot, grasp the coiling whip
that lashed them home, lay your hand on their manes
and swear by the mighty god who grips and shakes the earth
you never blocked my chariot—not by deliberate foul."

Antilochus came to his senses, backed off quickly:
"No more, please. I am much younger than you are,
lord Menelaus—you're my senior, you the greater man.
Well you know how the whims of youth break all the rules.
Our wits quicker than wind, our judgment just as flighty.
Bear with me now. I'll give you this mare I won—
of my own accord. And any finer trophy you'd ask
from my own stores, I'd volunteer at once,
gladly, Atrides, my royal king—*anything*
but fall from your favor all my days to come
and swear a false oath in the eyes of every god."

With that the son of magnanimous old Nestor
led the mare and turned her over to Menelaus' hands.
And his heart melted now like the dew that wets the corn
when the fresh stalks rise up and the ripe fields ripple—
so the heart in your chest was melted now, Menelaus,
and you gave your friend an answer, winged words:
"Antilochus, now it is my turn to yield to you,
for all my mounting anger . . .
you who were never wild or reckless in the past.
It's only youth that got the better of your discretion,
just this once—but the next time be more careful.
Try to refrain from cheating your superiors.
No other Achaean could have brought me round so soon,
but seeing that you have suffered much and labored long,
your noble father, your brother too—all for my sake—
I'll yield to your appeal, I'll even give you the mare,
though she is mine, so our people here will know
the heart inside me is never rigid, unrelenting."

He handed back the mare to Antilochus' man.
Noëmon led her off while Atrides took instead
the polished cauldron bright in all its sheen.
Meriones, who had come in fourth took fourth prize,
the two bars of gold. That left the fifth unclaimed,
the jar with double handles. Bearing it through the crowd
Achilles gave it to Nestor, standing close beside him,
urging, "Here, old friend—a trophy for you too!
Lay it away as a treasure . . .
let it remind you of the burial of Patroclus.
Never again will you see him among the Argives.
I give you this prize, a gift for giving's sake,
for now you will never fight with fists or wrestle,
or enter the spear-throw, or race on sprinting feet.
The burdens of old age already weigh you down."

And Achilles placed the trophy in Nestor's hands.
He thrilled to have it and spoke out winging words:
"True, true, my son, all of it, right on the mark.

My legs no longer firm, my friend, dead on my feet,
nor do my arms go shooting from my shoulders—
the stunning punch, the left and right are gone.
Oh make me young again, and the strength inside me
steady as a rock! As fresh as I was that day
the Epeans buried lord Amarynceus in Buprasion
and his sons held games to celebrate the king . . .
No one could match me there, none among the Epeans,
not even our own Pylians, or Aetolia's hardy men.
At boxing I destroyed Clytomedes, Enops' boy.
Ancaeus of Pleuron wrestled against me—down he went.
Fast as Iphiclus was, I raced him to his knees,
with a spear I outhurled Phyleus, Polydorus too.
Only at chariot-racing the sons of Actor beat me—
two against one, cutting before me, hellbent to win,
for the biggest prize was left for the last event.
But it took twins—one with the reins rock-steady,
holding them rock-steady, the other lashed the team.
So that's the man I was . . . but now's the time
for the younger men to lock in rough encounters,
time for me to yield to the pains of old age.
But there was a day I shone among the champions.
Well,
you must get on with your friend's burial now—
the games must go on—
but I accept this gladly, my old heart rejoices.
You never forget my friendship, never miss a chance
to pay me the honor I deserve among our comrades.
For all that you have done for me, Achilles,
may the immortals fill your cup with joy!"

He savored every word of Nestor's story.
Then Achilles made his way through crowds of troops
and set out prizes next for the bruising boxing-match.
He fetched and tethered a heavy-duty mule in the ring,
six years old, unbroken—the hardest kind to break—
and offered the loser a cup with double handles.
He rose up tall and challenged all the Argives:

"Son of Atreus—all you Achaean men-at-arms!
We invite two men—our best—to compete for these.
Put up your fists, fight for what you're worth.
The man that Apollo helps outlast the other—
clearly witnessed here by Achaea's armies—
he takes this beast of burden back to his tents
but the one he beats can have the two-eared cup."

And a powerful, huge man loomed up at once,
Panopeus' son Epeus, the famous boxing champion.
He clamped a hand on the draft mule and shouted,
"Step right up and get it—whoever wants that cup!
This mule is mine, I tell you. No Achaean in sight
will knock me out and take her—I am the greatest!
So what if I'm not a world-class man of war?
How can a man be first in all events?
I warn you, soldiers—so help me it's the truth—
I'll crush you with body-blows, I'll crack your ribs to splinters!
You keep your family mourners near to cart you off—
once my fists have worked you down to pulp!"

Dead silence. So the armies met his challenge.
Only Euryalus rose to take him on, heroic volunteer,
bred of Talaus' blood and a son of King Mecisteus
who went to Thebes in the old days, when Oedipus fell,
and there at his funeral games defeated all the Thebans.
The spearman Diomedes served as the man's second,
goading him on, intent to see him win.
First he cinched him round with the boxer's belt
then taking rawhide thongs, cut from a field-ox,
wrapped his knuckles well.

Both champions, belted tight,
stepped into the ring, squared off at each other and let loose,
trading jabs with their clenched fists then slugged it out—
flurries of jolting punches, terrific grinding of jaws,
sweat rivering, bodies glistening—suddenly Euryalus
glanced for an opening, dropped his guard and Epeus hurled
his smashing roundhouse hook to the head—a knockout blow!

He could keep his feet no longer, knees caved in on the spot—
as under the ruffling North Wind a fish goes arching up
and flops back down on a beach-break strewn with seaweed
and a dark wave blacks him out. So he left his feet
and down he went—out cold—but big-hearted Epeus
hoisted him in his arms and stood him upright.
A band of loyal followers rushed to help him,
led him out of the ring, his feet dragging,
head lolling to one side, spitting clots of blood . . .
still senseless after they propped him in their corner,
and they had to fetch the two-eared cup themselves.

Quickly
Achilles displayed before the troops the prizes set
for the third event, the grueling wrestling-match.
For the winner a large tripod made to stride a fire
and worth a dozen oxen, so the soldiers reckoned.
For the loser he led a woman through their midst,
worth four, they thought, and skilled in many crafts.
And he rose up tall and challenged all the Achaeans:
"Now two come forward—fight to win this prize!"
And the giant Ajax got to his feet at once,
Odysseus stood up too,
an expert at every subtle, cunning hold.
Both champions, belted tight, stepped into the ring
and grappling each other hard with big burly arms,
locked like rafters a master builder bolts together,
slanting into a pitched roof to fight the ripping winds.
And their backbones creaked as scuffling hands tugged
for submission-holds and sweat streamed down their spines
and clusters of raw welts broke out on ribs and shoulders
slippery, red with blood, and still they grappled, harder,
locking for victory, locked for that burnished tripod:
Odysseus no more able to trip and bring to ground
his man than Ajax could—Odysseus' brawn held out.
A stalemate. And the troops were growing bored,
so at last the giant Ajax spurred his rival,
grunting, "Son of Laertes—resourceful one, enough—
you hoist me or I hoist you—and leave the rest to Zeus."

As Ajax heaved him up Odysseus never missed a trick—
he kicked him behind the knee, clipping the hollow,
cut his legs from under him, knocked him backward—
pinned as Odysseus flung himself across his chest!
That roused the crowd, they leaned to look and marveled.
The next throw now—long-enduring Odysseus' turn . . .
he tried to hoist Great Ajax, budged him a little
off the ground, true, but he could not heave him clear,
then hooked him round a knee and down they sprawled together,
both men clenched in a death-lock, tussling round in dust.
And now they'd have jumped up, gone for the third fall
if Achilles himself had not stepped in and stopped them:
"No more struggling—don't kill yourselves in sport!
Victory goes to both. Share the prizes. Off you go,
so the rest of the men can have a crack at contests."

And they listened gladly, nodding at his decision,
wiped the dust from their backs and pulled their shirts on.

Achilles quickly set out prizes for the footrace.
A silver bowl, gorgeous, just six measures deep
but the finest mixing bowl in all the world.
Nothing could match its beauty—a masterpiece
that skilled Sidonian craftsmen wrought to perfection,
Phoenician traders shipped across the misty seas
and mooring in Thoas' roads, presented to the king.
Euneus son of Jason gave it to Prince Patroclus,
the ransom paid to release Lycaon, Priam's son.
This was the bowl Achilles offered up at games
to commemorate his great friend—for the one racer
who proved the fastest on his feet. For the runner-up
he produced a massive ox with rippling folds of fat
and half a bar of gold for him who came in last.
He rose up tall and challenged all the Achaeans:
"Now men come forward, fight to win this prize!"
And the racing Oilean Ajax sprang up at once,
Odysseus quick at tactics too, then Nestor's son,
Antilochus, fastest of all the young men in the ranks.

Achilles pointed out the post . . .
They toed the line—
and broke flat out from the start and Ajax shot ahead
with quick Odysseus coming right behind him, close
as the weaver's rod to a well-sashed woman's breast
when she deftly pulls it toward her, shooting the spool
across the warp, still closer, pressing her breast—
so close Odysseus sprinted, hot on Ajax' heels,
feet hitting his tracks before the dust could settle
and quick Odysseus panting, breathing down his neck,
always forcing the pace and all the Argives shouting,
cheering him on as he strained for triumph, sprinting on
and fast in the homestretch, spurting toward the goal
Odysseus prayed in his heart to blazing-eyed Athena,
"Hear me, Goddess, help me—hurry, urge me on!"
So Odysseus prayed and Athena heard his prayer,
put spring in his limbs, his feet, his fighting hands
and just as the whole field came lunging in for the trophy
Ajax slipped at a dead run—Athena tripped him up—
right where the dung lay slick from bellowing cattle
the swift runner Achilles slew in Patroclus' honor.
Dung stuffed his mouth, his nostrils dripped muck
as shining long-enduring Odysseus flashed past him
to come in first by far and carry off the cup
while Ajax took the ox. The racer in all his glory
just stood there, clutching one of the beast's horns,
spitting out the dung and sputtering to his comrades,
"Foul, by heaven! The goddess fouled my finish!
Always beside Odysseus—just like the man's mother,
rushing to put his rivals in the dust."

They all roared with laughter at his expense.
Antilochus came in last and carried off his prize
with a broad smile and a joke to warm his comrades:
"I'll tell you something you've always known, my friends—
down to this very day the gods prefer old-timers.
Look at Ajax now, with only a few years on me.
But Odysseus—why, *he*'s out of the dark ages,

one of the old relics—
but in green old age, they say. No mean feat
to beat him out in a race, for all but our Achilles."

Bantering so, but he flattered swift Achilles
and the matchless runner paid him back in kind:
"Antilochus, how can I let your praise go unrewarded?
Here's more gold—a half-bar more in the bargain."

He placed it in his hands, and he was glad to have it.
Then Achilles carried into the armies' broad ring
a spear trailing its long shadow, laid it down
and beside it placed a battle-shield and helmet,
the arms Patroclus stripped from lord Sarpedon.
And Achilles rose and challenged all the Argives:
"We invite two men—our best—to compete for these.
Full battle-gear, take up your slashing bronze lances.
Fight it out with each other, duel before the troops!
The soldier who gets in first and cuts a rival's flesh,
who pierces armor to draw blood and reach his entrails—
I'll give that man this broadsword, silver-studded,
handsome Thracian work I stripped from Asteropaeus.
But both fighters will share this armor, bear it off,
and we'll give them a victor's banquet in our tents."

Huge Telamonian Ajax rose to meet the challenge,
Tydeus' son rose too, the powerful Diomedes.
Both men armed at opposite sides of the forces,
into the ring they strode and met, burning for battle,
glances menacing, wild excitement seizing all their comrades.
And just coming in range, just closing on each other . . .
they made three rapid charges, three lunges and then—
Ajax stabbed through Tydides' round balanced shield
but failed to reach his flesh—saved by the breastplate
just behind the buckler! But now Diomedes thrusting
over the giant's massive shield, again and again,
threatened to graze his throat—the spearpoint glinting sharp—
and such terror for Ajax struck his Argive friends

they cried for them to stop, to divide the prizes,
"Share and share alike!" But the hero Achilles
took the great long sword and gave it to Diomedes,
slung in its sheath on a supple, well-cut sword-strap.

And now Achilles set out a lump of pig iron,
the shot Eetion used to put with all his power
before the swift runner Pelides brought him down
and hauled it off in the ships with all his other wealth.
Achilles rose up tall and challenged every Achaean:
"Now men come forward—compete to win this prize!
An ingot big enough to keep the winner in iron
for five wheeling years. Though his rich estates
lie far away in the country, it won't be want of iron
that brings his shepherd or plowman into town—
he'll be well-stocked at home."
That was his offer.
Up stood Polypoetes, always braced for battle,
Leonteus flanked him, strong, intense as a god,
then Telamon's son Great Ajax, lord Epeus too.
They stood in a row. Big Epeus hefted the iron,
swung and heaved it—and comrades burst out laughing.
Next the veteran Leonteus gave the weight a hurl,
then Ajax came up third and the giant flung it hard
with his rippling brawny arm to pass all other marks.
But then Polypoetes braced for battle took the weight
and far as a seasoned herdsman flings his throwing staff,
whirling in flight across his cows to keep them all in line—
so far he outhurled the whole field. The armies roared.
And the powerful Polypoetes' men sprang up to bear
the king's trophy back to their hollow ships.
Archery next—
and again Achilles set out iron, dark gray trophies,
ten double-headed axes, ten with single heads.
He stepped the mast of a dark-prowed man-of-war
far down the beach and tethered a fluttering dove
atop the pole, its foot looped with a light cord,
then challenged men to shoot and hit that mark:

"The man who hits the fluttering dove up there
can carry the whole array of double-axes home!
Whoever misses the bird but still hits the cord—
he's the loser, true, but he takes the single heads."

Teucer the master archer rose to meet the challenge,
Meriones joined him, Idomeneus' rough-and-ready aide.
They dropped lots in a bronze helmet, shook it hard
and the lot fell to Teucer to shoot first . . .
He quickly loosed an arrow, full-draw force
but never swore to the Archer
he'd slaughter splendid victims, newborn lambs,
so he missed the dove—Apollo grudged him that—
but he hit the cord that tethered the bird's foot,
the tearing arrow split the cord straight through
and the bird shot into the sky and left the tether
dangling down to ground. The armies roared applause.
But already clutching a shaft while Teucer aimed
Meriones leapt to snatch the bow from his hand
and quickly swore to the distant deadly Archer
he'd slaughter splendid victims, newborn lambs—
Up under the clouds he glimpsed the fluttering dove
and there as she wheeled he hit her right beneath the wing
and straight through the heart and out the arrow passed,
plunged at Meriones' foot and stabbed the earth hard.
The dove settled onto the mast of the dark-prowed ship,
her neck wrenched awry, her beating wings went slack
and life breath flew from her limbs that instant—
down she dropped, a long drop down to the ground.
The armies looked on wonder-struck and marveled.
Meriones carried off the double-axes, all ten,
Teucer took the singles back to his hollow ships.

Finally
Achilles produced a spear that trailed its long shadow,
a cauldron too, untouched by fire, chased with flowers
and worth an ox, and set them down in the ring.
And now the spear-throwers rose up to compete,
Atrides Agamemnon, lord of the far-flung kingdoms,

flanked by Idomeneus' rough-and-ready aide Meriones
but the swift runner Achilles interceded at once:
"Atrides—well we know how far you excel us all:
no one can match your strength at throwing spears,
you are the best by far!
Take first prize and return to your hollow ships
while we award this spear to the fighter Meriones,
if that would please your heart. That's what I propose."

And Agamemnon the lord of men could not resist.
Achilles gave the bronze-shod spear to Meriones.
And the winning hero Atrides gave his own prize
to his herald Talthybius—the king's burnished trophy.