

1 · THE · STRANGER ·

Nine long years had passed since that great and terrible victory. Nine summers and nine winters had passed, and on the island of Ithaca the people were still waiting for the return of their king, for Odysseus had not come home from the Trojan War. Every day his wife Penelope looked out over the restless sea wondering whether he was dead or alive. Every day his son Telemachus — who had been a baby when the war began and was now nineteen years old — wondered whether his father's body was rolling somewhere deep beneath the blue waves.

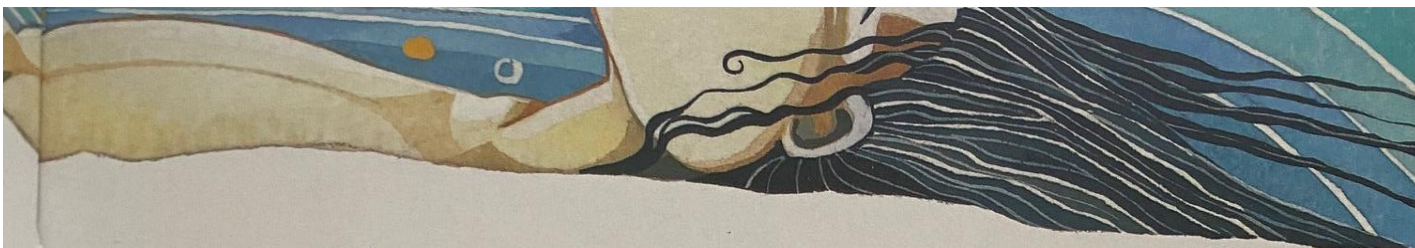
The island was in a state of chaos. It had been without a king for nineteen years. Suitors had invaded Odysseus's feasting hall, a motley company of princes, warriors, merchants and chancers trying their luck. All of them were hoping to win Penelope's hand in marriage, and trying to persuade her that Odysseus was dead. But Penelope refused to believe them. She clung to the slender hope that somewhere in the wide world he was still alive. She had told the suitors that she would only choose a new husband when

she had finished weaving a shroud for Odysseus's father. Every day she sat working at the loom. But every night, by the light of the moon, she unravelled all that she had woven during the day, so the shroud was never finished. And the suitors waited, passing the time by drinking Odysseus's wine, slaughtering his cattle, flirting with his maidservants and mocking his memory.

Meanwhile, on another island, a stranger was staggering out of the sea. His hair and beard were tangled and matted with salt. His whole body was caked with brine. Half dead with exhaustion, he crawled on his hands and knees across the sand. He made his way to a grove of trees and buried himself beneath the leaves scattered on the ground.

He closed his eyes and fell instantly into the sweet, oblivious balm of sleep.

It was the daughter of the king of that island who found him. Her name was Nausicaa. At first she thought the stranger was dead. But when she cautiously reached down and touched his arm, it was warm. She shook his shoulder and woke him. She fetched him a cup of water



and a piece of cloth to cover his nakedness. She led the stranger to her father's palace. She showed him a room where he could wash himself and she sent servants to bring him clothes.

As soon as he was alone, the stranger sponged himself from head to foot, washing the salt from his skin. He rubbed oil into his shoulders, neck and arms. He dressed himself in the fine clothes. Then Princess Nausicaa led him to her father's bronze-floored feasting hall.

King Alcinous was sitting on his throne. He looked the stranger up and down. 'Sit down. Eat! Drink!' he said.

Meat, bread, wine, honey-cakes, barley-meal and water were served. Gratefully the stranger sat at a table and ate. He ate for a long time. When at last his raging appetite had been satisfied and he was sitting back in his chair and wiping the crumbs from the corners of his mouth, King Alcinous said, 'There is food for the body, and there is food for the soul. Stranger, now that you have eaten, sit back and listen. My storyteller will entertain and enrich you with a story.'

The doors of the hall were thrown open and an old, blind storyteller was led into the hall. He stared in front of him as though he was peering into a world nobody else could see, his eyes yellowy-white and swollen with cataracts. He lifted his lyre to his shoulder and started to play. He threw back his head and burst into song:

I sing of the bronze Scaean gates of the city of Troy.

I sing of those bronze gates swinging open

And the mighty Trojan army riding out

With a whirring of wheels and a creaking of chariots,

With a neighing of horses and a shouting of men,

With a thundering of hooves and marching feet.

I sing of Prince Paris, his cloak billowing behind him,

His sword hungry for the savour of blood.

I sing of the Trojan army pouring across the plain.

And I sing of the clash of bronze against bronze

As the Trojan army meets the Greeks,

Like two rivers in full spate,

Each with its flotsam of uprooted trees,

Crashing into one another.

*And I sing of the Greek heroes;
Mighty Achilles severing heads with every stroke,
Nimble-witted Odysseus trailing a wake of the dead
And old Nestor fierce among his foes . . .*

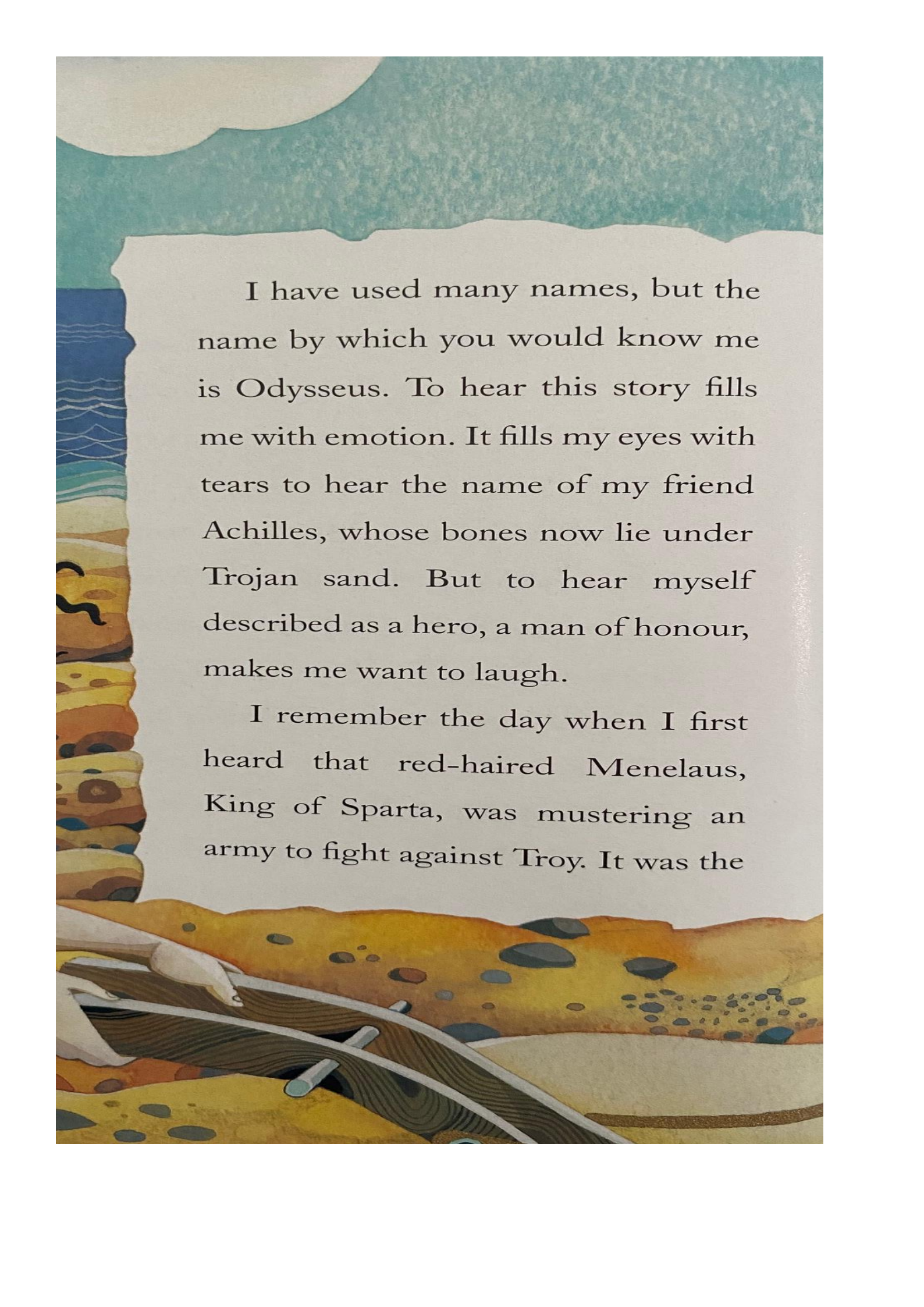
‘STOP!’ King Alcinous put his hand on the old man’s shoulder. ‘Stop! Stop! Our guest — he is weeping. His face is buried in his hands. His shoulders are shaking. Stranger, who are you? Why does this story bring such grief?’

The stranger lifted his head and looked at the king, his cheeks wet and glistening with tears.

King Alcinous got up from his throne and seized one of the stranger’s hands.

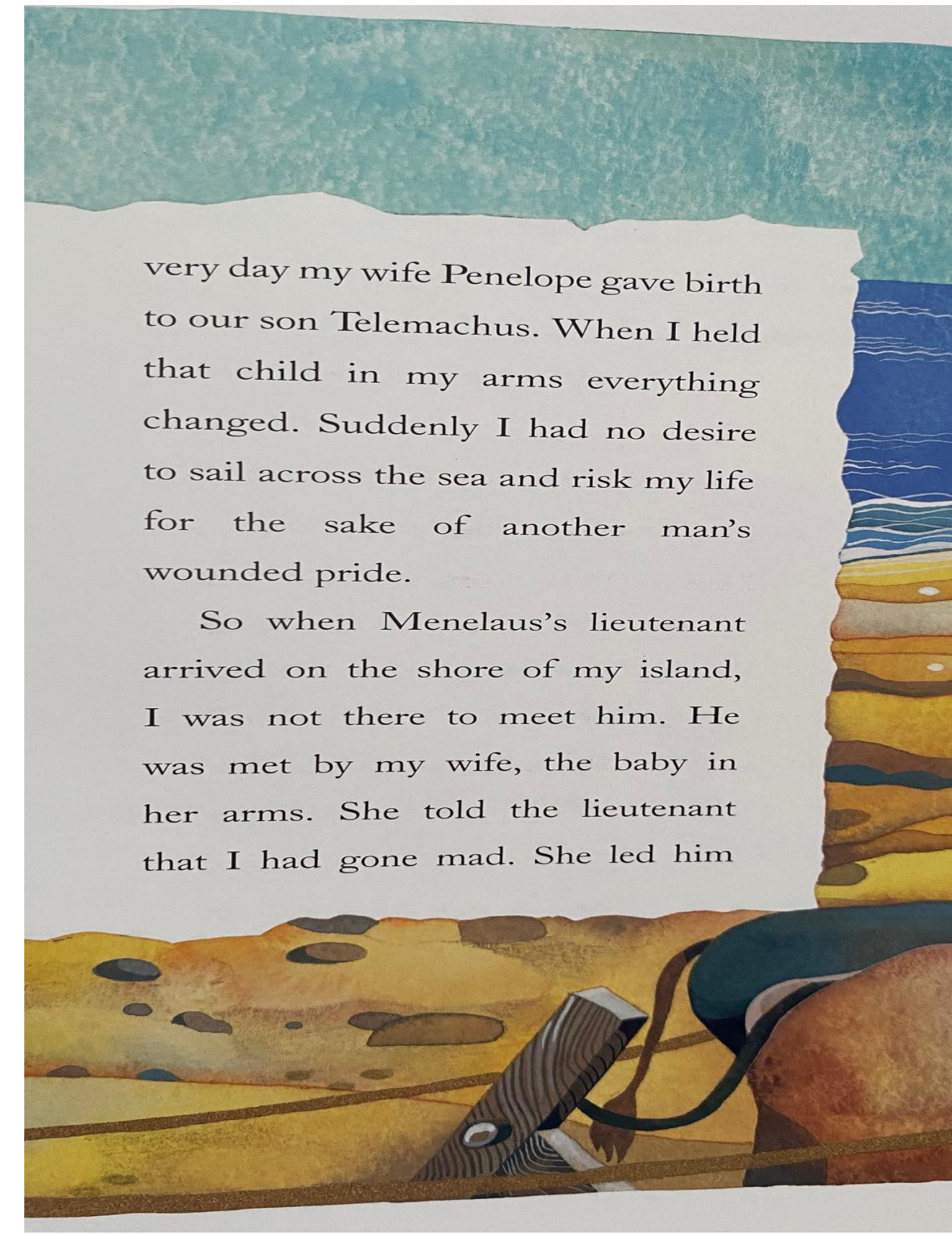
‘Nobody, whether of high or low degree, goes nameless in this world. Tell us who you are. We will listen to your story and learn. And I will send one of my high-prowed ships to take you to the place you are seeking.’

The stranger looked into the king’s face. He looked at the old storyteller and the princess. Then he slowly drew himself up to his full height, took a deep breath, and began to speak:



I have used many names, but the name by which you would know me is Odysseus. To hear this story fills me with emotion. It fills my eyes with tears to hear the name of my friend Achilles, whose bones now lie under Trojan sand. But to hear myself described as a hero, a man of honour, makes me want to laugh.

I remember the day when I first heard that red-haired Menelaus, King of Sparta, was mustering an army to fight against Troy. It was the



very day my wife Penelope gave birth to our son Telemachus. When I held that child in my arms everything changed. Suddenly I had no desire to sail across the sea and risk my life for the sake of another man's wounded pride.

So when Menelaus's lieutenant arrived on the shore of my island, I was not there to meet him. He was met by my wife, the baby in her arms. She told the lieutenant that I had gone mad. She led him

to a beach where he found me, my face streaked with dirt, my hair in greasy ringlets, and my clothes no more than filthy rags. I had harnessed a donkey and an ox to a plough. I was ploughing the shingle, sowing handfuls of salt over my shoulder into the furrows that I had made, raving all the while.

This lieutenant was suspicious. Already I was famous for my cunning. Before I understood what he was doing, he had grabbed the baby, run forward and put it down in front of the plough. When I saw what he had done, I knew he had outwitted me. If I were to continue my pretence of madness I would have to cut the baby in half with the blade of the plough. I had to admit that I was sane. I mustered an army from among my subjects and I joined the great host that laid siege to the walls of Troy.

All of us went a little mad during the war, what with the betrayals and the intrigues, the interventions of the immortals and the stupid petty arguments amongst ourselves. My ship was crammed with precious things when I set sail for home. As we voyaged, in my mind's eye I could see the hero's welcome I would receive when at last I reached rocky

Ithaca. I could almost see the streets of my land, lined with my people cheering. I could see myself stepping over the threshold of my feasting hall to find my beloved wife. My son would be a ten-year-old boy now. I could see the pride in the eyes of my father. I could almost feel my mother's warm embrace.

