

5 · THE · LAND · OF · THE · DEAD ·

Home is what a gull cries for over rough waters. There is nothing worse for mortal man than wandering. How many more storms before my ship could lower its sail?

I was haunted by memories of home. The long shadows of the afternoon stretching down the terraces and vineyards that ladder every slope, the scent of herbs on the breeze, the tongue of my dog against my palm, great Mount Neriton, the rocks, the goat tracks, the sandy beaches. A wife without a husband and a country without a king: these things compelled me to walk among the ghosts of the dead.

Circe gave us provisions and blankets. We soon discovered their purpose. The further north you sail, the colder it becomes. One morning when we woke, we could see our breath curling from our lips and our nostrils in a silver mist. A few days later we saw shards of ice hanging from the mast and the rigging. Then we found ourselves approaching a wall of fog that rose from the sea to the sky. I could not tell you for how long we sailed once we passed

inside that fog. Day and night had no meaning. There was only an endless clammy gloom.

The prow of the ship hit a sandbank. I and two of my companions took a pair of sheep ashore. We set off. The further we walked, the more uneasy we felt. Everything was infected with the greyness of the mist. All colour bled from our clothes and our skin. My companions became shifting forms in the fog beside me. My thoughts, too, became grey, sluggish, stupid, lumpen. Every doubt and regret I've ever felt crowded in on my mind, each with its own persuasive voice. All my old wounds ached. Every step took a little more effort. It was as if we were wading against the current of an ocean we couldn't see.

We reached the banks of a broad, oily river. It was the River of Forgetfulness. On the other side, hidden from our

view by the fog, was the Realm of Many Guests, the Land of the Dead.

We scooped a hole in the sand at our feet. We lifted the heads of the sheep and slit their throats. Their dark blood flowed into the hole. Shapes formed in the fog. We heard a moaning, a hissing. The ghosts of the dead were coming, summoned by our sacrifice. We saw young brides, warriors with gaping gashes, gurgling children. The sight of them made my soldiers shake with horror. Most of the spirits of the dead have lost all memory of their previous life. They are stupid, hungry wraiths until they can drink the blood of a mortal sacrifice. They long to remember their lives.

Our blood offering was for one of the few who has kept his mind: the blind prophet Tiresias. Though I had instructed my companions to hold back the flickering ghosts until

Tiresias had drunk his fill, they could do nothing but stand and shake and gape. It was as though they had fallen into some kind of trance. It was left to me to draw my sword and keep the dead at bay. One of the wraiths was as insubstantial as all the others, but he had a dignity, a purpose, that the others lacked. Surely this was Tiresias. I guided him with the sound of my voice towards the pool. He cupped his hands and drank. His white eyes twitched in their sockets.

‘What can you see?’

‘You are Odysseus. You seek a way back to rocky Ithaca, but it will be hard for you. Poseidon longs to avenge the mutilation of his son Polyphemus. There is only one way that you will see the lights of home again. You must learn humility. You must rein in your desires and those of your crew. During your voyage you will approach an island that will seem to you the perfect place to land. You’ll see cattle grazing, no sign of human life. You will want to stop and feast on their flesh, but Odysseus, be warned, this herd is the prized possession of the Sun God Hyperion. If he were to see you harm them — and he is the Sun God, he sees all — he would go to Zeus

and demand revenge. The Cyclops's curse would pursue you relentlessly. If ever you reached your homeland, it would be alone and unknown, and under a strange sail, and there would be danger waiting where there should be a welcome.

‘If you can overcome this danger there is another journey you must make. You must put an oar on your shoulder and walk inland, leaving behind everyone, everything, everywhere you know. At last you will reach a crossroads. There a man will stop you and gaze in wonder at the oar. He will ask you what it is, whether it is some kind of winnowing fan for separating the grain.

‘This is a place where they do not know what an oar is because they do not know what the sea is. This is a place where you truly are Nobody. In this place you must plant the blade of the oar in the ground so that the shaft rises up towards the sky. Make a sacrifice to great Poseidon of a ram, a bull and a breeding boar. Then you will have made your peace with him. If you can do all these things, your death will come to you in old age, from the sea, in the veils of sleep, like a long-awaited friend.

'This vision I have seen. It has come to me through a Gate of Horn.'

As the sightless seer spoke, more and more of the flickering ghosts gathered around the pool. I saw a sight then that struck me with such a shock of sorrow that I stumbled back and fell into the pool of blood. I turned and ran, screaming, my two companions following me, not knowing why they were running. Soon we were back on the ship and out on the open sea.

My companions never asked me what had put me to flight. I never told them that I had seen among the dead the face of my mother. I had been away so long that if I ever reached my homeland she would not be there. I would never again feel her warm embrace.