

She'd come down to a clear running spring, Artacia,
 where the local people came to fill their pails.
 My shipmates clustered round her, asking questions:
 who was king of the realm? who ruled the natives here?
 She waved at once to her father's high-roofed halls.
 They entered the sumptuous palace, found his wife inside—
 a woman huge as a mountain crag who filled them all with horror.
 Straightaway she summoned royal Antiphates from assembly,
 her husband, who prepared my crew a barbarous welcome.
 Snatching one of my men, he tore him up for dinner—
 the other two sprang free and reached the ships.
 But the king let loose a howling through the town
 that brought tremendous Laestrygonians swarming up
 from every side—hundreds, not like men, like Giants!
 Down from the cliffs they flung great rocks a man could hardly hoist
 and a ghastly shattering din rose up from all the ships—
 men in their death-cries, hulls smashed to splinters—
 They speared the crews like fish
 and whisked them home to make their grisly meal.
 But while they killed them off in the harbor depths
 I pulled the sword from beside my hip and hacked away
 at the ropes that moored my blue-prowed ship of war
 and shouted rapid orders at my shipmates:
 'Put your backs in the oars—now row or die!'
 In terror of death they ripped the swells—all as one—
 and what a joy as we darted out toward open sea,
 clear of those beetling cliffs . . . my ship alone.
 But the rest went down en masse. Our squadron sank.

From there we sailed on, glad to escape our death
 yet sick at heart for the dear companions we had lost.
 We reached the Aeaean island next, the home of Circe
 the nymph with lovely braids, an awesome power too
 who can speak with human voice,
 the true sister of murderous-minded Aeetes.
 Both were bred by the Sun who lights our lives;
 their mother was Perse, a child the Ocean bore.
 We brought our ship to port without a sound

as a god eased her into a harbor safe and snug,
 and for two days and two nights we lay by there,
 eating our hearts out, bent with pain and bone-tired.
 When Dawn with her lovely locks brought on the third day,
 at last I took my spear and my sharp sword again,
 rushed up from the ship to find a lookout point,
 hoping to glimpse some sign of human labor,
 catch some human voices . . .
 I scaled a commanding crag and, scanning hard,
 I could just make out some smoke from Circe's halls,
 drifting up from the broad terrain through brush and woods.
 Mulling it over, I thought I'd scout the ground—
 that fire aglow in the smoke, I saw it, true,
 but soon enough this seemed the better plan:
 I'd go back to shore and the swift ship first,
 feed the men, then send *them* out for scouting.
 I was well on my way down, nearing our ship
 when a god took pity on me, wandering all alone;
 he sent me a big stag with high branching antlers,
 right across my path—the sun's heat forced him down
 from his forest range to drink at a river's banks—
 just bounding out of the timber when I hit him
 square in the backbone, halfway down the spine
 and my bronze spear went punching clean through—
 he dropped in the dust, groaning, gasping out his breath.
 Treading on him, I wrenched my bronze spear from the wound,
 left it there on the ground, and snapping off some twigs
 and creepers, twisted a rope about a fathom long,
 I braided it tight, hand over hand, then lashed
 the four hocks of that magnificent beast.
 Loaded round my neck I lugged him toward the ship,
 trudging, propped on my spear—no way to sling him
 over a shoulder, steadying him with one free arm—
 the kill was so immense!
 I flung him down by the hull and roused the men,
 going up to them all with a word to lift their spirits:
 'Listen to me, my comrades, brothers in hardship—
 we won't go down to the House of Death, not yet,

not till our day arrives. Up with you, look,
there's still some meat and drink in our good ship.
Put our minds on food—why die of hunger here?'

My hardy urging brought them round at once.
Heads came up from cloaks and there by the barren sea
they gazed at the stag, their eyes wide—my noble trophy.
But once they'd looked their fill and warmed their hearts,
they washed their hands and prepared a splendid meal. 200
Now all day long till the sun went down we sat
and feasted on sides of meat and seasoned wine.
Then when the sun had set and night came on
we lay down and slept at the water's shelving edge.
When young Dawn with her rose-red fingers shone once more
I called a muster quickly, informing all the crew,
'Listen to me, my comrades, brothers in hardship,
we can't tell east from west, the dawn from the dusk,
nor where the sun that lights our lives goes under earth
nor where it rises. We must think of a plan at once, 210
some cunning stroke. I doubt there's one still left.
I scaled a commanding crag and from that height
surveyed an entire island
ringed like a crown by endless wastes of sea.
But the land itself lies low, and I did see smoke
drifting up from its heart through thick brush and woods.'

My message broke their spirit as they recalled
the gruesome work of the Laestrygonian king Antiphates
and the hearty cannibal Cyclops thirsting for our blood.
They burst into cries, wailing, streaming live tears
that gained us nothing—what good can come of grief? 220

And so, numbering off my band of men-at-arms
into two platoons, I assigned them each a leader:
I took one and lord Eurylochus the other.
We quickly shook lots in a bronze helmet—
the lot of brave Eurylochus leapt out first.
So he moved off with his two and twenty comrades,

weeping, leaving us behind in tears as well . . .
Deep in the wooded glens they came on Circe's palace
built of dressed stone on a cleared rise of land. 230
Mountain wolves and lions were roaming round the grounds—
she'd bewitched them herself, she gave them magic drugs.
But they wouldn't attack my men; they just came pawing
up around them, fawning, swishing their long tails—
eager as hounds that fawn around their master,
coming home from a feast,
who always brings back scraps to calm them down.
So they came nuzzling round my men—lions, wolves
with big powerful claws—and the men cringed in fear
at the sight of those strange, ferocious beasts . . . But still 240
they paused at her doors, the nymph with lovely braids,
Circe—and deep inside they heard her singing, lifting
her spellbinding voice as she glided back and forth
at her great immortal loom, her enchanting web
a shimmering glory only goddesses can weave.
Polites, captain of armies, took command,
the closest, most devoted man I had: 'Friends,
there's someone inside, plying a great loom,
and how she sings—enthraling!
The whole house is echoing to her song. 250
Goddess or woman—let's call out to her now!'

So he urged and the men called out and hailed her.
She opened her gleaming doors at once and stepped forth,
inviting them all in, and in they went, all innocence.
Only Eurylochus stayed behind—he sensed a trap . . .
She ushered them in to sit on high-backed chairs,
then she mixed them a potion—cheese, barley
and pale honey mulled in Pramnian wine—
but into the brew she stirred her wicked drugs
to wipe from their memories any thought of home.
Once they'd drained the bowls she filled, suddenly
she struck with her wand, drove them into her pigsties,
all of them bristling into swine—with grunts,
snouts—even their bodies, yes, and only 260

the men's minds stayed steadfast as before.

So off they went to their pens, sobbing, squealing
as Circe flung them acorns, cornel nuts and mast,
common fodder for hogs that root and roll in mud.

Back Eurylochus ran to our swift black ship
to tell the disaster our poor friends had faced.
But try as he might, he couldn't get a word out.
Numbing sorrow had stunned the man to silence—
tears welled in his eyes, his heart possessed by grief.
We assailed him with questions—all at our wits' end—
till at last he could recount the fate our friends had met:
'Off we went through the brush, captain, as you commanded.
Deep in the wooded glens we came on Circe's palace
built of dressed stone on a cleared rise of land.
Someone inside was plying a great loom,
and how she sang—in a high clear voice!
Goddess or woman—we called out and hailed her . . .
She opened her gleaming doors at once and stepped forth,
inviting us all in, and in we went, all innocence.
But I stayed behind—I sensed a trap. Suddenly
all vanished—blotted out—not one face showed again,
though I sat there keeping watch a good long time.'

At that report I slung the hefty bronze blade
of my silver-studded sword around my shoulder,
slung my bow on too and told our comrade,
'Lead me back by the same way that you came.'
But he flung both arms around my knees and pleaded,
begging me with his tears and winging words:
'Don't force me back there, captain, king—
leave me here on the spot.
You will never return yourself, I swear,
you'll never bring back a single man alive.
Quick, cut and run with the rest of us here—
we can still escape the fatal day!'

But I shot back, 'Eurylochus, stay right here,

eating, drinking, safe by the black ship.
I must be off. Necessity drives me on.'

Leaving the ship and shore, I headed inland,
clambering up through hushed, entrancing glades until,
as I was nearing the halls of Circe skilled in spells,
approaching her palace—Hermes god of the golden wand
crossed my path, and he looked for all the world
like a young man sporting his first beard,
just in the prime and warm pride of youth,
and grasped me by the hand and asked me kindly,
'Where are you going now, my unlucky friend—
trekking over the hills alone in unfamiliar country?
And your men are all in there, in Circe's palace,
cooped like swine, hock by jowl in the sties.
Have you come to set them free?

Well, I warn you, you won't get home yourself,
you'll stay right there, trapped with all the rest.
But wait, I can save you, free you from that great danger.
Look, here is a potent drug. Take it to Circe's halls—
its power alone will shield you from the fatal day.
Let me tell you of all the witch's subtle craft . . .
She'll mix you a potion, lace the brew with drugs
but she'll be powerless to bewitch you, even so—
this magic herb I give will fight her spells.

Now here's your plan of action, step by step.
The moment Circe strikes with her long thin wand,
you draw your sharp sword sheathed at your hip
and rush her fast as if to run her through!
She'll cower in fear and coax you to her bed—
but don't refuse the goddess' bed, not then, not if
she's to release your friends and treat you well yourself.
But have her swear the binding oath of the blessed gods
she'll never plot some new intrigue to harm you,
once you lie there naked—
never unman you, strip away your courage!'

With that

the giant-killer handed over the magic herb,

antidote from Hermes



pulling it from the earth,
 and Hermes showed me all its name and nature.
 Its root is black and its flower white as milk
 and the gods call it moly. Dangerous for a mortal man
 to pluck from the soil but not for deathless gods.
 All lies within their power.

Now Hermes went his way
 to the steep heights of Olympus, over the island's woods
 while I, just approaching the halls of Circe,
 my heart a heaving storm at every step,
 paused at her doors, the nymph with lovely braids—
 I stood and shouted to her there. She heard my voice,
 she opened her gleaming doors at once and stepped forth,
 inviting me in, and in I went, all anguish now . . .
 She led me in to sit on a silver-studded chair,
 ornately carved, with a stool to rest my feet.
 In a golden bowl she mixed a potion for me to drink,
 stirring her poison in, her heart aswirl with evil.
 And then she passed it on, I drank it down
 but it never worked its spell—
 she struck with her wand and 'Now,' she cried,
 'off to your sty, you swine, and wallow with your friends!'
 But I, I drew my sharp sword sheathed at my hip
 and rushed her fast as if to run her through—
 She screamed, slid under my blade, hugged my knees
 with a flood of warm tears and a burst of winging words:
 'Who are you? where are you from? your city? your parents?
 I'm wonderstruck—you drank my drugs, you're not bewitched!
 Never has any other man withstood my potion, never,
 once it's past his lips and he has drunk it down.
 You have a mind in *you* no magic can enchant!
 You must be Odysseus, man of twists and turns—
 Hermes the giant-killer, god of the golden wand,
 he always said you'd come,
 homeward bound from Troy in your swift black ship.
 Come, sheathe your sword, let's go to bed together,
 mount my bed and mix in the magic work of love—
 we'll breed deep trust between us.'

So she enticed
 but I fought back, still wary. 'Circe, Circe,
 how dare you tell me to treat you with any warmth?
 You who turned my men to swine in your own house and now
 you hold me here as well—teeming with treachery
 you lure me to your room to mount your bed,
 so once I lie there naked
 you'll unman me, strip away my courage!
 Mount your bed? Not for all the world. Not
 until you consent to swear, goddess, a binding oath
 you'll never plot some new intrigue to harm me!'

Straightaway

she began to swear the oath that I required—never,
 she'd never do me harm—and when she'd finished,
 then, at last, I mounted Circe's gorgeous bed . . .

At the same time her handmaids bustled through the halls,
 four in all who perform the goddess' household tasks:
 nymphs, daughters born of the springs and groves
 and the sacred rivers running down to open sea.
 One draped the chairs with fine crimson covers
 over the seats she'd spread with linen cloths below.
 A second drew up silver tables before the chairs
 and laid out golden trays to hold the bread.
 A third mulled heady, heart-warming wine
 in a silver bowl and set out golden cups.
 A fourth brought water and lit a blazing fire
 beneath a massive cauldron. The water heated soon,
 and once it reached the boil in the glowing bronze
 she eased me into a tub and bathed me from the cauldron,
 mixing the hot and cold to suit my taste, showering
 head and shoulders down until she'd washed away
 the spirit-numbing exhaustion from my body.
 The bathing finished, rubbing me sleek with oil,
 throwing warm fleece and a shirt around my shoulders,
 she led me in to sit on a silver-studded chair,
 ornately carved, with a stool to rest my feet.
 A maid brought water soon in a graceful golden pitcher

and over a silver basin tipped it out
 so I might rinse my hands,
 then pulled a gleaming table to my side.
 A staid housekeeper brought on bread to serve me,
 appetizers aplenty too, lavish with her bounty.
 She pressed me to eat. I had no taste for food.
 I just sat there, mind wandering, far away . . .
 lost in grim forebodings.

As soon as Circe saw me,
 huddled, not touching my food, immersed in sorrow,
 she sidled near with a coaxing, winged word:
 'Odysseus, why just sit there, struck dumb,
 eating your heart out, not touching food or drink?
 Suspect me of still more treachery? Nothing to fear.
 Haven't I just sworn my solemn, binding oath?'

So she asked, but I protested, 'Circe—
 how could any man in his right mind endure
 the taste of food and drink before he'd freed
 his comrades-in-arms and looked them in the eyes?
 If you, you really want me to eat and drink,
 set them free, all my beloved comrades—
 let me feast my eyes.'

So I demanded.

Circe strode on through the halls and out,
 her wand held high in hand and, flinging open the pens,
 drove forth my men, who looked like full-grown swine.
 Facing her, there they stood as she went along the ranks,
 anointing them one by one with some new magic oil—
 and look, the bristles grown by the first wicked drug
 that Circe gave them slipped away from their limbs
 and they turned men again: younger than ever,
 taller by far, more handsome to the eye, and yes,
 they knew me at once and each man grasped my hands
 and a painful longing for tears overcame us all,
 a terrible sobbing echoed through the house . . .
 The goddess herself was moved and, standing by me,
 warmly urged me on—a lustrous goddess now:

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'Royal son of Laertes, Odysseus, tried and true,
 go at once to your ship at the water's edge,
 haul her straight up on the shore first
 and stow your cargo and running gear in caves,
 then back you come and bring your trusty crew.'

Her urging won my stubborn spirit over.
 Down I went to the swift ship at the water's edge,
 and there on the decks I found my loyal crew
 consumed with grief and weeping live warm tears.
 But now, as calves in stalls when cows come home,
 droves of them herded back from field to farmyard
 once they've grazed their fill—as all their young calves
 come frisking out to meet them, bucking out of their pens,
 lowing nonstop, jostling, rushing round their mothers—
 so my shipmates there at the sight of my return
 came pressing round me now, streaming tears,
 so deeply moved in their hearts they felt as if
 they'd made it back to their own land, their city.
 Ithaca's rocky soil where they were bred and reared.
 And through their tears their words went winging home:
 'You're back again, my king! How thrilled we are—
 as if we'd reached our country, Ithaca, at last!
 But come, tell us about the fate our comrades met.'

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Still I replied with a timely word of comfort:
 'Let's haul our ship straight up on the shore first
 and stow our cargo and running gear in caves.
 Then hurry, all of you, come along with me
 to see our friends in the magic halls of Circe,
 eating and drinking—the feast flows on forever.'

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So I said and they jumped to do my bidding.
 Only Eurylochus tried to hold my shipmates back,
 his mutinous outburst aimed at one and all:
 'Poor fools, where are we running now?
 Why are we tempting fate?—
 why stumble blindly down to Circe's halls?