

ILIAD 3

Two armies,
The troops in divisions
Under their commanders,

The Trojans advancing across the plain

*Like cranes beating their metallic wings
In the stormy sky at winter's onset,
Unspeckable rain at their backs, their necks stretched
Toward Oceanic streams and down
To strafe the brown Pygmy race,
Bringing strife and bloodshed from the sky at dawn,*

While the Greeks moved forward in silence,
Their breath curling in long angry plumes
That acknowledged their pledges to die for each other.

*Banks of mist settle on mountain peaks
And seep into the valleys. Shepherds dislike it
But for a thief it is better than night,
And a man can see only as far as he can throw a stone.*

No more could the soldiers see through the cloud of dust
The armies tramped up as they moved through the plain.

And when they had almost closed—

50

[16-51]

Book 3

51

Was it a god?—no, not a god
But Paris who stepped out from the Trojan ranks,
Leopard skin on his shoulders, curved bow, sword,
And shaking two bronze-tipped spears at the Greeks
He invited their best to fight him to the death.

When Menelaus, who was Ares' darling, saw him
Strutting out from the ranks, he felt

*As a lion must feel when he finds the carcass
Of a stag or wild goat, and, half-starving,
Consumes it greedily even though hounds and hunters
Are swarming down on him.*

30

It was Paris all right,

Who could have passed for a god,
And Menelaus grinned as he hefted his gear
And stepped down from his chariot. He would
Have his revenge at last. Paris' blood
Turned milky when he saw him coming on,
And he faded back into the Trojan troops
With cheeks as pale as if he had seen—
Had almost stepped on—a poisonous snake
In a mountain pass. He could barely stand
As disdainful Trojans made room for him in the ranks,
And Hector, seeing his brother tremble at Atreus' son,
Started in on him with these abusive epithets:

40

"Paris, you desperate, womanizing pretty boy!
I wish you had never been born, or had died unmarried.
Better that than this disgrace before the troops.
Can't you just hear it, the long-haired Greeks
Chuckling and saying that our champion wins
For good looks but comes up short on offense and defense?
Is this how you were when you got up a crew
And sailed overseas, hobnobbed with the warrior caste
In a foreign country and sailed off with
A beautiful woman with marriage ties to half of them?
You're nothing but trouble for your father and your city,
A joke to your enemies and an embarrassment to yourself.

50

[1-15]

No, don't stand up to Menelaus: you might find out
 What kind of a man it is whose wife you're sleeping with.
 You think your lyre will help you, or Aphrodite's gifts,
 Your hair, your pretty face, when you sprawl in the dust?
 It's the Trojans who are cowards, or you'd have long since
 Been dressed out in stones for all the harm you've done."

60

And Paris, handsome as a god, answered him:

"That's only just, Hector. You've got a mind
 Like an axe, you know, always sharp,
 Making the skilled cut through a ship's beam,
 Multiplying force—nothing ever turns your edge.
 But don't throw golden Aphrodite's gifts in my face.
 We don't get to choose what the gods give us, you know,
 And we can't just toss their gifts aside.
 So all right, if you want me to fight, fine.
 Have the Trojans and the Greeks sit down,
 And Menelaus and I will square off in the middle
 To fight for Helen and all her possessions.
 Winner take all.
 And everyone else will swear oaths of friendship,
 You all to live here in the fertile Troad,
 And they to go back to bluegrass Argos
 And Achaea with its beautiful women."

70

Hector liked what he heard.

80

He went out in front along the Trojan ranks
 Holding a spear broadside and made them all sit down.
 Greek archers and slingers were taking aim at him
 And already starting to shoot arrows and stones
 When Agamemnon boomed out a command
 For them to hold their fire. Hector was signalling
 That he had something to say, and his helmet
 Caught the morning sun as he addressed both armies:

84

"Listen to me, Trojans, and you warriors from Greece.
 Paris, on account of whom this war began, says this:
 He wants all the Trojan and Greek combatants
 To lay their weapons down on the ground."

90

He and Menelaus will square off in the middle
 And fight for Helen and all her possessions.
 Winner take all.

And everyone else swears oaths of friendship."

Utter silence,

Until Menelaus, who was good at the war shout, said:

"Now listen to me, since my pain is paramount
 In all this. It may be that the Greeks and Trojans
 Can at last call it quits. We've had enough suffering
 From this quarrel of mine that Paris began.
 Whichever of us is due to die, let him die.
 Then the rest of you can be done with each other.
 Bring a pair of lambs, a white one and a black,
 For Earth and Sun. Our side will bring another for Zeus.
 And have Priam come, so he can swear oaths himself,
 In person, since his sons are arrogant perjurers
 Who would just as soon trample on Zeus' solemn word.
 Younger men always have their heads in the clouds.
 An old man looks ahead and behind, and the result
 Is far better for both parties involved."

110

You could see their mood brighten,
 Greeks and Trojans both, with the hope
 That this wretched war would soon be over.
 They pulled their chariots up in rows,
 Dismounted, and piled up their weapons.

There was not much space between the two armies.

Hector dispatched two heralds to the city
 To fetch the lambs and summon Priam.
 Agamemnon sent Talthylus back to the ships
 With orders to bring back a lamb.

120

While these human heralds were off on their missions,
 Iris, the gods' herald (who is also the rainbow),
 Came to white-armed Helen disguised as Laodice,
 Her sister-in-law and Priam's most beautiful daughter.

120

She found Helen in the main hall, weaving a folding mantle
On a great loom and designing into the blood-red fabric
The trials that the Trojans and Greeks had suffered
For her beauty under Ares' murderous hands.

130

Iris stood near Helen and said:

"Come and see, dear lady, the amazing thing
The Greek and Trojan warriors have done.
They've fought all these years out on the plain,
Lusting for each other's blood, but now
They've sat down in silence—halted the war—
They're leaning back on their shields
And their long spears are stuck in the sand.
But Paris and Menelaus are going to fight
A duel with lances, and the winner
Will lay claim to you as his beloved wife."

140

The goddess's words turned Helen's mind
Into a sweet mist of desire
For her former husband, her parents, and her city.
She dressed herself in fine silvery linens
And came out of her bedroom crying softly.
Two maids trailed behind, Aethrè,
Pittheus' daughter, and cow-eyed Clyménè.
They came to the Western Gate,
Where a knot of old men sat—

150

Priam, Panthous, Thymoetes,
Lampus, Clytius, Hicetaon
(Who was in Ares' bloodline)
Ucalegon and Antenor,
Who lived and breathed wisdom—

These veterans sat on the wall by the Western Gate,
Too old to fight now, but excellent counsellors.

*Think of cicadas perched on a branch,
Their delicate voices shrill in the woods.*

Such were the voices of these Trojan elders

160

Sitting on the tower by the Western Gate
When they saw Helen coming
Their rasping whispers flew along.

"Who could blame either the Trojans or
For suffering so long for a woman like this.

"Her eyes are not human."

"Whatever she is, let her go back with the ships
And spare us and our children a generation of pain."

But Priam called out to her:

"Come here, dear child, sit next to me
So you can see your former husband
And dear kinsmen. You are not to blame
For this war with the Greeks. The gods are.
Now tell me, who is that enormous man
Towering over the Greek troops, handsome,
Well-built? I've never laid eyes on such
A fine figure of a man. He looks like a king."

170

And Helen,
The sky's brightness reflected in her mortal face:

"Reverend you are to me dear father-in-law,
A man to hold in awe. I'm so ashamed.
Death should have been a sweeter evil to me
Than following your son here, leaving my home,
My marriage, my friends, my precious daughter,
That lovely time in my life. None of it was to be,
And lamenting it has been my slow death.
But you asked me something, and I'll answer.
That man is Agamemnon, son of Atreus,
A great king and a strong warrior both.
He was also my brother-in-law—shameless bitch
That I am—if that life was ever real."

180

The old man was lost in reverie and wonder:

190

"The son of Atreus. Born to power and wealth.
 Blessed by the gods. Now I see
 How many Greek lads you command.
 I thought I saw it all when I went
 To Phrygia once and saw thousands
 Of soldiers and gleaming horses
 Under the command of Otreus and Mygdon
 Massed by the banks of the Sangarios,
 An army in which I myself served
 On that fateful day when the Amazons
 Swept down to fight against men.
 They were nothing compared to these wild-eyed Greeks."

200

Then he saw Odysseus and asked:

"Now tell me about this one, dear child,
 Shorter than Agamemnon by a head
 But broader in the shoulders and chest.
 His armor is lying on the ground
 And he's roaming the ranks like a ram,
 That's it, just like a thick-fleeced ram
 Striding through a flock of silvery sheep."

210

And Helen, Zeus' child:

"That is Laertes' son,
 The master strategist Odysseus, born and bred
 In the rocky hills of Ithaca. He knows
 Every trick there is, and his mind runs deep."

Antenor turned to her and observed astutely:

"Your words are not off the mark there, madam.
 Odysseus came here once before, on an embassy
 For your sake along with Menelaus.
 I entertained them courteously in the great hall
 And learned each man's character and depth of mind.
 Standing in a crowd of Trojans, Menelaus,
 With his wide shoulders, was more prominent,
 But when both were seated Odysseus was lordlier."

220

When it came time for each to speak in public
 And weave a spell of wisdom with their words,
 Menelaus spoke fluently enough, to the point
 And very clearly, but briefly, since he is not
 A man of many words. Being older, he spoke first.
 Then Odysseus, the master strategist, rose quickly,
 But just stood there, his eyes fixed on the ground.
 He did not move his staff forward or backward
 But held it steady. You would have thought him
 A dull, surly lout without any wit. But when he
 Opened his mouth and projected his voice
 The words fell down like snowflakes in a blizzard.
 No mortal could have vied with Odysseus then,
 And we no longer held his looks against him."

240

The third hero old Priam saw was Ajax.

"And who is that giant of a Greek over there,
 Head and shoulders above the other Achaeans?"

And Helen, shining in her long trailing robes:

"That is big Ajax, the army's mountain.
 Standing beyond him is Idomeneus,
 Like a god, with his Cretan commanders.
 He used to come often from Crete
 And Menelaus would entertain him
 In our house. And now I can make out
 All the other Greeks, those I know
 And whose names I could tell you.
 But there are two commanders I do not see,
 Castor the horsebreaker and the boxer
 Polydeuces, my brothers, born of one mother.
 Either they didn't come here from lovely Lacedaemon,
 Or else they did come in their seagoing ships
 But avoid the company of the fighting men
 In horror of the shame and disgrace that are mine."

250

But they had long been held by the life-giving earth
 There in Lacedaemon, their ancestral land.

260

And now the heralds came up to the town
With the sacrificial victims, the two rams,
And as fruit of the fields, hearty wine
In a goatskin bag. The herald *Idaeus*
Held a gleaming bowl and a golden chalice
And roused the old man with this speech:

"Rise, son of *Laomedon*.

The best men of *Troy* and *Achaea* summon you
Down to the plain to swear solemn oaths.

270

Paris and *Menelaus* will fight

A duel for the woman, and she will
Follow the winner with all her possessions.

Everyone else will swear oaths of friendship,

We to live here in the fertile *Troad*,

And they to go back to bluegrass *Argos*

And *Achaea* with its beautiful women."

The old man stiffened.

He ordered his companions to yoke his horses,
Then mounted himself and took the reins.

280

Antenor rode with him in the beautiful chariot

And they drove out through the Western Gate

And onto the plain. They pulled up in the space

Between the two armies and stepped down to the earth.

Agamemnon rose,

And *Odysseus*, deep in thought.

Heralds brought the animals for the oaths

And mixed wine in the great bowl.

They poured water over the kings' hands,

Then *Agamemnon* drew the knife

That hung by his sword scabbard

And cut hairs from the rams' heads.

The heralds gave these to the leaders on both sides,

And *Agamemnon* lifted his palms to the sky:

290

"Zeus, Father, Lord of *Ida*,

Greatest and most glorious;

Helios, who sees all and hears all,
Rivers and Earth, and Powers below
Who punish perjurers after death,
Witness and protect these sacred Oaths:

300

If *Paris Alexander* kills *Menelaus*,

Helen and all her goods are his,

And we will sail away in our ships.

But if *Menelaus* kills *Paris*,

The *Trojans* will surrender *Helen*

With all her goods and pay the *Argives*

A fit penalty for generations to come.

If *Priam* and *Priam's* sons refuse,

Upon *Paris' death*, this penalty to me,

I swear to wage this war to its end."

310

He spoke, then slashed the rams' throats

And put the gasping animals on the ground,

Their proud temper undone by whetted bronze.

Then they all filled their cups

With wine from the bowl and poured libations

To the gods eternal and prayed,

Greek and *Trojan* alike, in words like these:

"Zeus almighty and most glorious

And all you other immortal gods,

Whoever breaks this oath and truce,

May their brains spill to the ground

Like this wine, theirs and their children's,

And may other men master their wives."

320

But Zeus would not fulfill their prayers.

Then *Priam* spoke his mind:

"Hear me, *Trojans* and *Achaean* soldiers:

I am going back now to windswept *Ilion*

Since I cannot bear to see with my own eyes

My dear son fighting with *Menelaus*,

Who is dear to *Ares*. Zeus and the other immortals

330

Doubtless know whose death is destined."

And this man who was a god's equal
Loaded the rams onto his chariot
For interment in Trojan soil, mounted,
And took the reins. Antenor stood behind him
And together they drove back to Ilion.

Priam's son Hector and brilliant Odysseus
First measured off an arena and then
Shook lots in a bronze helmet to decide
Which of the two would cast his spear first.
You could see hands lifted to heaven
On both sides and hear whispered prayers:

340

"Death, Lord Zeus,
For whichever of the two
Started this business,
But grant us your peace."

Great Hector shook the helmet, sunlight
Glancing off his own as he looked away,
And out jumped Paris' lot.

The armies

350

Sat down, rank after rank, tooled weapons
And high-stepping horses idle by each man.

The heroes armed.

Paris, silken-haired Helen's present husband,
Bound greaves on his shins with silver clasps,
Put on his brother Lycaon's breastplate,
Which fit him well, slung around his shoulders
A bronze sword inlaid with silver
And a large, heavy shield. On his head he placed
A crested helmet, and the horsehair plume
Nodded menacingly.

360

Likewise Menelaus' gear.

They put their armor on in the ranks
And then stepped out into no-man's-land,
A cold light in their eyes.

Veterans on both sides, horse-breaking Trojans
And bronze-kneed Greeks, just sat and stared.

They stood close, closer in the measured arena,
Shaking their spears, half-mad with jealousy.
And then Paris threw. A long shadow trailed his spear
As it moved through the air, and it hit the circle
Of Menelaus' shield, but the spearpoint crumpled
Against its tough metal skin. It was Menelaus' turn now,
And as he rose in his bronze he prayed to Zeus:

370

"Lord Zeus, make Paris pay for the evil he's done to me,
Smite him down with my hands so that men for all time
Will fear to transgress against a host's offered friendship."

380

With this prayer behind it Menelaus' spear
Carried through Paris' polished shield
And bored into the intricate breastplate,
The point shearing his shirt and nicking his ribs
As Paris twisted aside from black fatality.
Menelaus drew his silver-hammered sword
And came down with it hard on the crest
Of Paris' helmet, but the blade shattered
Into three or four pieces and fell from his hands.
Menelaus groaned and looked up to the sky:

"Father Zeus, no god curses us more than you.
I thought Paris was going to pay for his crimes,
And now my sword has broken in my hands,
And my spear's thrown away. I missed the bastard!"

390

As Menelaus spoke he lunged forward
And twisted his fingers into the thick horsehair

On Paris' helmet, pivoted on his heel,
And started dragging him back to the Greeks.
The tooled-leather chinstrap of Paris' helmet
Was cutting into his neck's tender skin,
And Menelaus would have dragged him
All the way back and won no end of glory.
But Aphrodite, Zeus' daughter, had all this
In sharp focus and snapped the oxhide chinstrap,
Leaving Menelaus clenching an empty helmet,
Which the hero, spinning like a discus thrower,
Heaved into the hands of the Greek spectators.
Then he went back for the kill.

400

But Aphrodite

Whisked Paris away with the sleight of a goddess,
Enveloping him in mist, and lofted him into
The incensed air of his vaulted bedroom.
Then she went for Helen, and found her
In a crowd of Trojan women high on the tower.
A withered hand tugged at Helen's fragrant robe.

410

The goddess was now the phantom of an old woman
Who had spun wool for Helen back in Lacedaemon,
Beautiful wool, and Helen loved her dearly.
In this crone's guise Aphrodite spoke to Helen:

"Over here. Paris wants you to come home.
He's propped up on pillows in your bedroom,
So silky and beautiful you'd never think
He'd just come from combat, but was going to a dance,
Or coming from a dance and had just now sat down."

420

This wrung Helen's heart. She knew
It was the goddess—the beautiful neck,
The irresistible line of her breasts,
The iridescent eyes. She was in awe
For a moment, and then spoke to her:

"You eerie thing, why do you love
Lying to me like this? Where are you taking me now?"

Phrygia? Beautiful Maeonia? Another city
Where you have some other boyfriend for me?
Or is it because Menelaus, having just beaten Paris,
Wants to take his hateful wife back to his house
That you stand here now with treachery in your heart?
Go sit by Paris yourself! Descend from the gods' high road,
Allow your precious feet not to tread on Olympus,
Go fret over him constantly, protect him.
Maybe someday he'll make you his wife—or even his slave.
I'm not going back there. It would be treason
To share his bed. The Trojan women
Would hold me at fault. I have enough pain as it is."

440

And Aphrodite, angry with her, said:

"Don't vex me, bitch, or I may let go of you
And hate you as extravagantly as I love you now.
I can make you repulsive to both sides, you know,
Trojans and Greeks, and then where will you be?"

Helen was afraid, and this child of Zeus
Pulled her silvery-white linens around her
And walked silently through the Trojan women,
Eluding them completely. The goddess went ahead
And led her to Paris' beautiful house. The servants
Suddenly all found something to do.
Helen moved like daylight to the vaulted bedroom,
Where Aphrodite, smiling, placed a chair for her
Opposite Paris. Helen, daughter of Zeus,
Sat down and, averting her eyes, said reproachfully:

450

"Back from the war? You should have died out there,
Beaten by a real hero, my former husband.
You used to boast you were better than Menelaus,
When it came to spear work and hand-to-hand combat.
Why don't you go challenge him to fight again,
Right now? I wouldn't recommend it, though.
A fair fight between you and Ares' redhead darling.
You'd go down in no time under his spear."

460

Paris answered her:

"Don't insult me, Helen.

Menelaus beat me this time—with Athena's help.

Next time I'll beat him. We have gods on our side too.

Enough of this.

Let's go to bed now and make love.

I've never wanted you so much,

Not even when I first took you away

From Lacedaemon in my sailing ship

And made love to you on the island of Craneae.

I want you even more now than I wanted you then."

470

He walked to the bed, and Helen followed.

While the two of them slept in their bed,

Menelaus prowled the ranks looking for Paris.

The Trojan troops, as much as they would have liked to,

Could not produce him. To a man,

They hated Paris as they hated death itself.

So Agamemnon, as commander-in-chief, proclaimed:

480

"Hear me, Trojans, allied troops, and Dardanians:

The victory clearly belongs to Menelaus.

Surrender therefore Argive Helen

And all the possessions that come with her.

We will further assess a suitable penalty,

A tribute to be paid for generations to come."

Thus Agamemnon. And the Greeks cheered.

ILIAD 4

The gods were seated with Zeus

On his golden terrace, and Hebe

Was pouring them nectar. They toasted

Each other with golden cups

As they looked out at Troy.

Zeus all at once

Started to provoke Hera with taunts:

"Well, Menelaus has a pair of goddesses

To help him, Hera of Argos

And Athena the Defender,

But they prefer to sit on the sidelines

Enjoying themselves. Aphrodite, now,

Smiling as always, stays with her hero

And manages to stave off his doom.

Did you see how she saved him just now

When it looked like he was about to die!

Still, Menelaus, Ares' favorite, clearly won.

But we should decide all this now.

Should we let war rage again

Or establish peace between the two sides?

If somehow we all could agree to do this

Priam's city might still be a place to live,

And Menelaus could take Argive Helen home."

10

20