

Twenty ewers of bright silver each in a polished trivet
Their shining cheeks engraved by silversmiths
With files of long-nosed soldiers on the march:

And they pass by:
And after them a sledge
Piled with twelve lots of Asian gold
Carefully weighed, worth a small city:

And they pass by:
And last of all, guarding a sacrificial hog,
Talthibios passed by into the centre of the ring.

Yellow mists over Mount Ida.
The hog lowers its gilded tusks.
Is still.

By Agamemnon's feet Talthibios sprinkles barley,
Snips a tuft from the hog's nape,
Waits for a breeze to nudge it off his palm
Into the flames that burn between the army and its King.

Haze covers Ida.
Sand falls down sand.
Even the gods are listless.

And Agamemnon spreads his arms,
Raises his face towards the sun, and cries:

"G O D

Be my witness.

E A R T H

My witness.

S U N, S K Y, W A T E R, W I N D

My witness.

*I have not tampered with the girl
I took unjustly from Achilles."*

Then drags his knife across the hog's silk throat.

Mists over Ida.

Slaves gut and throw the dead hog in the sea.

The army like ten thousand yellow stones.

Achilles says:
"So be it.
Eat, and prepare to fight."

And took Briseis to his ship.

Under the curve the keel makes
Where it sweeps upright to the painted beak
Achilles' heroes placed their gilded oars
Set twelve carved thwarts across them
Surfaced this stage with wolf- and beaver-fleece
Amid whose stirring nap Patroclus lay
The damaged statue of a prince awaiting transportation.

Near it Achilles sat, Odysseus beside,
And women brought them food.
"Patroclus liked to eat," Achilles said,
"And you cooked well, Patroclus, didn't you?"

Particularly well that summer when
My cousin Ajax and king Nestor drove
Up from the Pel'ponnesus crying 'wife'
And 'theft' and 'war' and 'please' and
What is this 'eat' of yours, Odysseus?
If you were telling me: He's dead, your father; well,
I might eat a bit; troubled, it's true; but eat
Like any fool who came God knows how many mist

And danger mixed sea miles to repossess fair Helen.

I know you, Ithaca: you think:
Achilles will fight better if he feeds.
Don't be so sure.

I do not care about his gifts. I do not care, Odysseus,
Do not care.

Patroclus was my life's sole love.
The only living thing that called
Love out of me.

At night I used to dream of how, when he came home to Greece,
He'd tell them of my death—for I must die—and show my son
This house, for instance, or that stone beside the stream,
My long green meadows stretching through the light
So clear it seems to magnify . . .”

And here Achilles falls asleep beside his dead;
And king Odysseus goes off as close to tears
As he will ever be.

Now I shall ask you to imagine how
Men under discipline of death prepare for war.
There is much more to it than armament,
And kicks from those who could not catch an hour's sleep
Waking the ones who dozed like rows of spoons;
Or those with everything to lose, the kings,
Asleep like pistols in red velvet.
Moments like these absolve the needs dividing men.
Whatever caught and brought and kept them here
Under Troy's Wall for ten burnt years
Is lost: and for a while they join a terrible equality,
Are virtuous, self-sacrificing, free:
And so insidious is this liberty
That those surviving it will bear
An even greater servitude to its root:
Believing they were whole, while they were brave;

That they were rich, because their loot was great;
That war was meaningful, because they lost their friends.
They rise!—the Greeks with smiling iron mouths.
They are like Nature; like a mass of flame;
Great lengths of water struck by changing winds;
A forest of innumerable trees;
Boundless sand; snowfall across broad steppes at dusk.
As a huge beast stands and turns around itself,
The well-fed, glittering army, stands and turns.

Nothing can happen till Achilles wakes.

He wakes.

Those who have slept with sorrow in their hearts
Know all too well how short but sweet
The instant of their coming-to can be:
The heart is strong, as if it never sorrowed;
The mind's dear clarity intact; and then,
The vast, unhappy stone from yesterday
Rolls down these vital units to the bottom of oneself.

Achilles saw his armour in that instant
And its ominous radiance flooded his heart.
Bright pads with toggles crossed behind the knees,
Bodice of fitted tungsten, pliable straps;
His shield as round and rich as moons in spring;
His sword's haft parked between sheaves of grey obsidian
From which a lucid blade stood out, leaf-shaped, adorned
With running spirals.

And for his head a welded cortex; yes,
Though it is noon, the helmet screams against the light;
Scratches the eye; so violent it can be seen
Across three thousand years.

Achilles stands; he stretches; turns on his heel;
Punches the sunlight, bends, then—jumps! . . .
And lets the world turn fractionally beneath his feet.

Noon. In the foothills
Melons emerge from their green hidings.
Heat.

He walks towards the chariot.
Greece waits.

Over the wells in Troy mosquitoes hover.

Beside the chariot.
Leading the sacred horses; watching his this-day's driver, Automedon,
Cinch, shake out the reins, and lay them on the rail.
Dapple and white the horses are; perfect they are;
Sneezing to clear their cool black muzzles.

He mounts.

The chariot's basket dips. The whip
Fires in between the horses' ears.
And as in dreams, or at Cape Kennedy, they rise,
Slowly it seems, their chests like royals, yet
Behind them in a double plume the sand curls up,
Is barely dented by their flying hooves,
And wheels that barely touch the world,
And the wind slams shut behind them.

"Fast as you are," Achilles says,
"When twilight makes the armistice,
Take care you don't leave me behind
As you left my Patroclus."

And as it ran the white horse turned its tall face back
And said:

"Prince,
This time we will, this time we can, but this time cannot last.
And when we leave you, not for dead, but dead,
God will not call us negligent as you have done."

And Achilles, shaken, says:
"I know I will not make old bones."

And laid his scourge against their racing flanks.

Someone has left a spear stuck in the sand.