

Death Passages

Il. 21. 34-135

“Achilles now encountered Lycaon, a son of Priam, escaping from the river. He had met the man before in a night sortie, taking him captive in his father’s orchard, where he had been trimming the young shoots from a wild fig tree with his keen knife to make chariot rails. Noble Achilles had descended on him like a lightning bolt from the dark sky, bundled him aboard ship, and sold him at Lemnos, Jason’s son being the purchaser. He was ransomed from Lemnos, at a heavy price, by a friend Eëtion of Imbros, who sent him to sacred Arisbe, but he had slipped away secretly, and returned to Troy, his ancestral home, though he had no more than eleven days to enjoy the company of his friends. For on the twelfth the gods drove him yet again into the hands of Achilles who was now to send him to the House of Hades, loath though he was to go.

Fleet-footed Achilles found him defenceless, without helmet, shield, or spear, all of which he had dropped in his weariness, his knees giving way beneath him, sweat pouring from him, as he struggled from the river. Achilles mused on this with wonder, communing with his proud heart: ‘Well now, marvels will never cease! If this man can return, perhaps I’ll see every brave Trojan I’ve killed rise again from the darkness, escaping the merciless day of death, as this man has escaped from sacred Lemnos, despite those great stretches of grey sea, that put paid to many a longing. Here then, let him taste the point of my spear, so I can discover whether he’ll return from the underworld, or be thwarted by the fertile earth, that holds even the mighty.’

So he mused and waited, while Lycaon came to him, eager to clasp Achilles’ knees, and cheat vile death and dark destiny. Noble Achilles raised his long spear, ready to strike him down, but Lycaon stooped beneath the shaft, stumbled in and clasped the warrior’s knees, so the spear, though eager to glut itself on human flesh, slid over his back, and fixed itself in the ground. Then clasping Achilles’ knee with one hand, and clinging relentlessly to the sharp-bladed shaft with the other, words of supplication poured from him: ‘Achilles, at your knees I beg for your acknowledgement and mercy. I come as a known suppliant to you, Beloved of Zeus, for I first ate bread at your table the day you took me captive in the orchard, and took me far from parents and friends, to sell me in sacred Lemnos. I brought you the price of a hundred oxen. Then I was ransomed, for three times as much, and this is the twelfth day since I came home to Ilium after all my suffering, only for mortal fate to place me once more in your hands. Father Zeus must surely hate me, to do so to me again. I am the son, doomed to a brief span it seems, of Laothoe, daughter of old Altes, king of the warlike Leleges, who holds lofty Pedasus above the Satnioeis. Priam wed his daughter, and she bore two sons, both fated to fall into your hands. Godlike Polydorus you killed in the front line, striking him with a throw of your sharp spear, and now evil comes to me, since I, whom a god brings to your feet, seem fated to be your victim. Yet it is one more reason not to kill me, since you now know I am not from the womb that bore Hector, who slew your great and gentle friend.’ So the highborn son of Priam pleaded with Achilles, but harsh was the reply.

‘Fool, do not talk to me of ransom, make me no speeches! Before the day of fate overtook Patroclus, I had a mind to spare you Trojans. Many I took alive, selling them far away. Now not one shall keep his life, of all the gods send to my hands before Troy not one solitary Trojan, and least of all the sons of Priam. You too, my friend, must die: why so sad? Patroclus, a far better man, has died. Or look at me, how big and fine I am, my father’s a great man, and a goddess bore me, yet death and remorseless fate await me too, either at

sunrise, evening or high noon, some man in battle will strike me with his spear, or pierce me with an arrow from his bow.'

So he spoke, and Lycaon's heart failed him, his knees likewise, and letting go the spear he sank to the ground his arms outstretched. But Achilles, drawing his keen sword, struck him on the neck and collarbone, the double-edged blade biting through, so he fell headlong in the dust, and the black blood ran out and soaked the earth. Then Achilles seized him by the heel and hurled him to the river to be washed away, taunting him with winged words: 'Lie with the fish: they'll suck the blood from your wounds, they'll care not a jot for you, nor will your mother lay you on a bier to mourn, but swirling Scamander will wash you to the deep sea's maw. Many a fish will dart among the waves, rising beneath the dark surface to eat Lycaon's white flesh. Death to you, Trojans, till I reach sacred Troy: you run in front, I'll cut you down behind. Nor will the fine river, its whirling silver, save you, though you've sacrificed to Scamander these many years, slaughtering bulls and hurling living horses into his stream. You too must die, and meet dark fate, till you have paid for Patroclus and the Greeks, killed near the swift ships, while I was gone.'"

Il. 22.322-54

"Now, the fine bronze armour he stripped from mighty Patroclus when he killed him covered all Hector's flesh except for one opening at the throat, where the collarbones knit neck and shoulders, and violent death may come most swiftly. There, as Hector charged at him, noble Achilles aimed his ash spear, and drove its heavy bronze blade clean through the tender neck, though without cutting the windpipe or robbing Hector of the power of speech. Hector fell in the dust and Achilles shouted out in triumph: 'While you were despoiling Patroclus, no doubt, in your folly, you thought yourself quite safe, Hector, and forgot all about me in my absence. Far from him, by the hollow ships, was a mightier man, who should have been his helper but stayed behind, and that was I, who now have brought you low. The dogs and carrion birds will tear apart your flesh, but him the Achaeans will bury.'

Then Hector of the gleaming helm replied, in a feeble voice: 'At your feet I beg, by your parents, by your own life, don't let the dogs devour my flesh by the hollow ships. Accept the ransom my royal father and mother will offer, stores of gold and bronze, and let them carry my body home, so the Trojans and their wives may grant me in death my portion of fire.'

But fleet-footed Achilles glared at him in answer: 'Don't speak of my parents, dog. I wish the fury and the pain in me could drive me to carve and eat you raw for what you did, as surely as this is true: no living man will keep the dogs from gnawing at your skull, not if men weighed out twenty, thirty times your worth in ransom, and promised even more, not though

Dardanian Priam bid them give your weight in gold, not even then will your royal mother lay you on a bier to grieve for you, the son she bore, rather shall dogs, and carrion birds, devour you utterly.'"