The Wrath of Achilles

Homer’s Iliad, plainly told

Andries J. Greyling

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About this book

The Wrath of Achilles retells Homer's *Iliad* plainly and reverently, so that a reader who never studied Classics can finish it and know what the poem actually is — the quarrel, the withdrawal, the embassy, Patroclus, the killing of Hector, Priam in the hut — and what each of its twenty-four books asks of a human life.

The names. Butler's English uses Roman forms for the gods — **Jove** (Zeus), **Juno** (Hera), **Minerva** (Athena), **Neptune** (Poseidon), **Mars** (Ares), **Venus** (Aphrodite), **Diana** (Artemis), **Mercury** (Hermes) — and **Ulysses** for Odysseus, **Diomed** for Diomedes. This book uses Greek names in the teaching voice where it helps a modern reader, and Butler's names in quoted passages. Both are honest to the translation quoted.

A word on reverence and honesty. The *Iliad* is one of the foundation stones of Western literature and was sacred song to the ancient Greeks. This book is written by an outsider who loves the text and claims no authority over it — *a guest at someone else's fire*. It keeps three things visibly separate: **(a)** what the poem says and what the tradition holds; **(b)** matters of scholarship, where reasonable people differ; and **(c)** the author's own plain-language gloss (always marked **plainly:**).

The passages. Quotations are from Samuel Butler's *The Iliad of Homer* (1898), a public-domain English translation, always attributed. Where Butler's Edwardian prose is set beside a plainer modern line, the modern line is the author's, marked as such.

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Proem — A Guest at the Fire

I came to this book the way most people come to Homer: sideways, and late, and through someone else's summary.

Someone told me the *Iliad* was "the Trojan War" — ten years of Greeks at the gates of Troy, Helen of the face that launched a thousand ships, the wooden horse, the city burning. Some of that is in the story, or near it, or grew up around it like barnacles on a hull. But the *Iliad* itself is not the whole war. It is **fifty-one days** in the tenth year of the siege — and it ends not with the fall of Troy but with a father weeping over his son's body and an enemy warrior letting him take it home. The horse, the sack, the burning city — those belong to other poems, other tellings. Homer gives you something stranger and more human: **what happens when the best fighter on your side stops fighting because his pride was wounded, and everyone pays.**

That is the poem. Not a history lesson. A story about **wrath** — *mēnis*, the first word of the Greek, the word the Muse is told to sing — and what wrath costs, and what grief does to it at the end.

Then another reader — the best kind, the kind who loves a thing enough to be honest about it — told me something I had half-known and wholly avoided. *I know the names,* she said. *Achilles, Hector, the Trojan Horse. I couldn't tell you what actually happens in the poem.* She was right. Of course she was right. You can know a story's

shadow on the culture — references in films, phrases in English — and still not know **what Homer actually wrote.** This book is the answer to that.

Let me be plain about what I am.

I am not a Classicist. I am not a priest of Apollo, a Homeric scholar with forty years on the scholia, or a military archaeologist who can tell you whether Troy VIa was sacked in the right century. I hold no authority over this text whatsoever. There are men and women who have given their lives to the *Iliad* — who can read the Greek line by line, who can hear the oral-formulaic music beneath the English, who know which epithets are stock and which cut fresh. They are the householders here. This is their fire.

I am a guest at it.

A guest at a fire has exactly one set of obligations, which I mean to keep on every page that follows. He warms his hands and is grateful. He does not rearrange the wood. He does not tell the family what their fire *really* means — he listens while they tell him. He carries nothing away that wasn't offered. And when he goes home and tells his own people about the warmth of it, he tells them the truth: *this was not my fire, but they let me sit, and here is what I saw by the light of it.*

That is the most I will claim. Not the truth of Homer — that belongs to the tradition that has carried him for three thousand years. Only an honest visitor's account of a poem that has been burning since before the English language existed, told warmly, told carefully, and told plainly enough that you can carry a little of the warmth home yourself.

A few promises, so you know the rules I have set for myself.

I will keep three voices separate, and I will always tell you which one is speaking. When I tell you what the *Iliad* says and

what its tradition holds it to mean, that is the text, and I will be faithful to it. When I tell you what scholars argue about — when Troy was real, how the poem was composed, whether "Homer" was one singer or many — I will mark it as scholarship, a thing reasonable people dispute. And when I reach for a plain modern phrase to make an ancient one land, that is *me* — my gloss, my reach — and I will mark it as mine so you never mistake my paraphrase for Homer's. When you read `plainly:`, that is my voice, owning the reach.

I will use a real translation, and name it. The passages I quote come from Samuel Butler's *The Iliad of Homer*, published in 1898 — plain prose, long out of copyright, freely available at Project Gutenberg #2199. Butler was, like me, an outsider who loved it; his English is Edwardian but readable. I keep him because quoting a real, named, public translation is honest in a way that smoothing everything into my own words would not be. Where Butler's diction is too thick to learn from, I'll set a plain line beside it and mark it mine.

I will not flatten this into something it isn't. I am not going to tell you the *Iliad* is "really" a PTSD pamphlet, or "really" the same as every war movie, or "really" just gods-as-weather-metaphors with the magic taken out. The poem has gods who eat ambrosia and quarrel on Olympus. It has an honour code that can feel alien. It has fate, and glory, and the terrible beauty of a short life. I will not sand those edges off to make it comfortable. I will make it *legible* — that is my job — not tame.

I will tell you the whole poem. Twenty-four books. The quarrel, the catalogue, the duels, the embassy, Patroclus, the shield, Hector's death, Priam in the hut. Not a summary that skips to the famous bits — the whole arc, because the arc is the point. Wrath that withdraws. Wrath that returns. Wrath that weeps.

The fire is lit. They have let us sit.

Here is what I saw by the light of it.

The Shore — why the poem begins in wrath

Before the wrath, the shore. And before the shore, a quarrel — the oldest quarrel in the world, the one over a woman and a slight and who gets to keep what was taken.

You need only a little of the backstory. The *Iliad* is fifteen thousand lines long; the war it sits inside lasted, in the myth, **ten years** — and the whole Trojan cycle, if you gathered every poem the Greeks told about it, would fill a library. You do not need the library. You need the square of ground the poem stands on.

Helen — the most beautiful woman in the world, or so the poets said — was wife to **Menelaus**, king of Sparta. **Paris**, a prince of Troy, came as a guest to Menelaus's house and stole her away to Troy. Or she went with him willingly; the poem keeps both truths alive and never quite settles which. Menelaus and his brother **Agamemnon**, the high king of the Greeks, gathered an army from every corner of the Greek-speaking world and sailed to Troy to bring her back. That was nine years ago.

For nine years the Greeks have camped on the beach below Troy's walls. They have raided the countryside, taken prizes, buried their dead. Troy still stands. The war has ground into a bloody routine — until the poem opens, in the **tenth year**, on the day everything breaks.

Here is what you need to know about the two men the story turns on.

Achilles is the greatest warrior alive — son of a mortal king and the sea-goddess Thetis, faster and stronger and more terrible in battle than any man who faces him. He came to Troy knowing a prophecy: if he stays and fights, he will win undying glory and die young; if he goes home, he will live long and be forgotten. He chose glory. He leads the **Myrmidons**, his own fierce contingent, and until the poem opens he has been the Greeks' hammer.

Agamemnon is the commander — king of Mycenae, lord of the whole expedition, a proud and jealous man who must be obeyed because he holds the sceptre, not because anyone loves him. He and Achilles have been rubbing against each other for nine years. Both are royal. Both are proud. The poem will call their quarrel a disaster sent by Zeus — and also show you exactly how human it is.

Between them, in the first lines, stands a girl: **Chryseis**, a war-prize taken from a sacked town, given to Agamemnon. Her father is **Chryses**, a priest of Apollo, and when Agamemnon refuses to give her back for ransom, Apollo sends a plague on the Greek camp. That is where Book One begins — not with the abduction of Helen, not with the horse, but with **sickness on the beach** and a king who will not bend and a hero who will not be disrespected.

The poem's first word, in Greek, is **mēnis** — wrath, anger, the kind that does not cool. The Muse is told to sing it: the anger of Achilles, and the **countless pains** it brought down on the Greeks. Not the war. Not Troy. **Wrath.** From line one: this is a poem about what happens inside a man when his honour is touched — and what that man does to everyone around him when he withdraws his strength.

The gods are already involved. They always are, in Homer — not as metaphors but as characters with appetites and favourites, sitting on Olympus, betting on mortals, sometimes descending to the plain

to save a son or settle a grudge. You do not need to believe in them to read the poem. You need to understand that *for Homer* they are as real as the spears. When Apollo sends the plague, Apollo sends the plague.

Plainly: You are dropped onto the beach like a new recruit — confused, smoky, already late. The whole ten-year siege is backstory. The poem is about **fifty-one days** and what wrath does in them. It does not begin with the reason for the war; it begins **in medias res** — in the middle of things — at the moment a petty cruelty (a king refusing a ransom) and a wounded pride (a hero stripped of his prize) combine to knock the best fighter out of the fight. That is deliberate. Everyone has stood on that beach — the place where a quarrel you did not start becomes your catastrophe because someone with power would not yield an inch.

> **A note on what's real here** *(scholarship — register b).* Whether Troy was a real city attacked by real Greeks, whether a single poet named Homer composed the *Iliad* or it grew across generations of singers, whether the war reflects a memory of Bronze Age conflict — scholars genuinely dispute all of this, and the poem does not need it settled to do its work. The same scholars place the *Iliad*'s composition somewhere between the eighth and seventh centuries BCE, drawing on oral traditions that may be older. None of that diminishes it. A thing can be assembled across centuries and still be the foundation stone of everything that came after. I note the scholarship because the honesty is the foundation — not because it changes what happens next on the shore.

Book One — The Quarrel

The scene

The poem does not begin with Helen on the wall or the horse at the gate. It begins with **sickness on the beach** — nine days of it, pyres burning through the dusk, arrows of Apollo finding men and mules and hounds until the camp stinks of smoke and fear.

Chryseis is the girl at the centre: a war-prize from a sacked town, given to **Agamemnon**, high king of the Greeks. Her father **Chryses** comes down to the ships as a priest of Apollo should — sceptre in hand, wreath on the staff, ransom in his train — and asks, with all proper reverence, for his daughter back. The army murmurs assent. Give her up. Respect the god.

Agamemnon refuses. Not politely. He sends the old man away with threats — she will grow old at Argos, weaving at his loom, far from her father — and Chryses walks the shore alone and prays to the god of the silver bow. Apollo hears. He comes down from Olympus dark as night, sits apart from the ships, and his arrows rattle on his back with the rage inside him. First the mules and hounds; then the men. All day the pyres burn. The plague does not stop.

On the tenth day **Achilles** calls an assembly. He is not king; he is the greatest fighter alive, and he has had enough of watching men die for a king's pride. The seer **Calchas**, protected by Achilles' oath, names the cause: Apollo is angry because Agamemnon dishonoured his priest. The king must return the girl.

Agamemnon yields — but only on his own terms. He will send Chryseis back. He will even send a hecatomb to Chryse. But he will not be the only lord left without a prize. He will take **Briseis**, the girl awarded to Achilles, and carry her off himself if he must.

You can feel the insult land. *Timē* — honour, public standing, the measure by which a warrior knows he is seen — stripped away in front of the whole host. Achilles' hand goes to his sword. He would kill Agamemnon where he stands.

Athena seizes him by the hair — visible to him alone — and holds him. *Wait*, she says. *Your time will come. Rail at him if you must; you will be paid back threefold.* He sheathes the blade. But what he says next alters the war.

He turns on Agamemnon with everything he has held back for nine years — *wine-bibber, face of a dog, heart of a hind* — and swears a great oath on the sceptre that will never sprout leaf again: he will fight no more. Not for Agamemnon. Not while the Trojans are at the ships. In the day of their distress, when **Hector** is killing Greeks at the sterns, they will look for Achilles and not find him.

Nestor rises, two generations of men under his memory, and speaks honey-sweet words no one obeys: yield, both of you; the Trojans would rejoice to hear this quarrel. Agamemnon mutters that Achilles must not make himself lord of all; Achilles says he will obey no longer. The assembly breaks in anger. Agamemnon sends Chryseis away under **Ulysses**, sends sacrifice to Apollo, and — remembering his threat — dispatches heralds to Achilles' tent. **Patroclus** brings **Briseis** out. She goes unwillingly. Achilles watches the sea and weeps.

Then he calls his mother.

Thetis rises from the water like grey mist off the waves, sits beside her son, caresses his hand. She already knows the weight of what he asks. Achilles is fated: stay at Troy and win undying glory but die young; go home and live long in obscurity. He chose glory. Now glory has been taken from him in the person of a girl and a king's insult.

Thetis goes to Olympus. **Zeus** — away at an Ethiopian feast for twelve days — will not be easy to move; **Hera** favours the Greeks and hates the request. When he returns, Thetis clasps his knees and reminds him of old debts: she alone saved him once when the other gods would have bound him. Reluctantly, dreadfully, Zeus nods. Let the Trojans win until the Greeks honour her son.

On Olympus the gods quarrel over it. Hera rails — *will you render my labour nothing?* — and Zeus answers with a threat that makes even immortals still. At last **Vulcan** limps among them pouring nectar, tells how Zeus once hurled him from heaven for defending his mother, and the blessed gods laugh until the halls ring. They feast to ambrosia and song while **Apollo** tunes the lyre and the sun goes down over the beach where men sleep — and the whole war tilts, in a single night, on one man's wounded pride.

Plainly

Pride between equals who must depend on each other is a weapon pointed at both their chests. Achilles is right that Agamemnon shamed him; Agamemnon is right that he must command. Neither yields. This is not "be nicer" — **honour, in a world that runs on public respect, is not a luxury.** Strip it from the person who holds your survival in his hands, and everyone bleeds. Book One.

The line

Homer's opening, as Butler gives it:

> *Sing, O goddess, the anger of Achilles son of Peleus, that brought countless ills upon the Achaeans. Many a brave soul did it send hurrying down to Hades, and many a hero did it yield a prey to dogs and vultures, for so were*

> *the counsels of Jove fulfilled from the day on which the son of Atreus, king of men, and great Achilles, first fell out with one another.*
>
> — Samuel Butler, *The Iliad of Homer* (1898), Book I (opening)

`plainly:` *Goddess, sing the rage of Achilles — the anger that ruined the Greeks, killed heroes, fed the dogs — all because the high king and the greatest warrior quarrelled.*

Book Two — The Catalogue of Ships

The scene

While the Greeks sleep, **Zeus** is awake. He is thinking how to honour **Thetis'** prayer — how to hurt the army that hurt her son — and he sends a **lying dream** to Agamemnon in the shape of **Nestor**, promising victory if the host attacks at once.

Agamemnon believes it. He dresses in the dawn, takes his father's imperishable sceptre, and calls the kings to council. There he lays a cunning plan: he will tell the rank and file that Troy is hopeless and they should sail home — and the princes must stop them if they try. **Nestor** approves. The test is set.

The whole army gathers on the wide-watered shore, swarming like bees from a cave, rumour running ahead of them through the host. Agamemnon rises with the sceptre forged by gods and handed down through kings, and speaks words that cut clean through nine years of slog: the timbers rot, the tackling fails, the wives wait, the work is undone — **let us sail back to our own land, for we shall not take Troy.**

The effect is instant. The multitude surges toward the ships like wind over corn. Men cheer each other on to haul the hulls down the channels, clear the launching-ways, unship the stays. The welkin rings with glad cries. For a moment the war nearly ends — not by

defeat but by choice, by thousands of ordinary men deciding in a body that nine years of dying for kings' quarrels is enough.

Juno sees it from Olympus and sends **Minerva** down in haste. **Ulysses**, backed by the goddess, takes Agamemnon's sceptre and runs along the beach. To officers he speaks reason; to common soldiers he speaks with the king's staff and with force. He stops the flight. One ship, **Protesilaus'** ship — the dead man's hull — he sends back to the water alone as a sign that the rest will follow if madness wins.

Then comes **Thersites** — bandy-legged, sharp-tongued, the ugly common man who says what others think and pays for it. He mocks Agamemnon to the crowd's laughter, listing the king's greed and the misery of the rank and file. Ulysses beats him with the sceptre until he weeps and sits down. The army settles, ashamed and rallied, and **Nestor** urges them at last to muster by nations.

What follows is the passage that stops every first-time reader cold — until you see what it is doing. Homer **names them all**.

The **Catalogue of Ships** rolls out every contingent of the Greek host — **Nestor** from Pylos, **Agamemnon** from Mycenae, **Menelaus** from Lacedaemon, **Diomedes** from Argos, **Ajax** the tower of the army, **Idomeneus** from Crete, **Odysseus** from rocky Ithaca — and behind each name a city, a coastline, a homeland. Fifty ships here, forty there, eighty from Crete, twelve from Ithaca. Homer names **Nireus**, the handsomest man after Achilles, and adds with a kind of shrug that he had but a small following. He names **Protesilaus**, already dead on Trojan soil, his house half-built, his wife tearing her cheeks at home — and his younger brother **Podarces** leading the men in his place. And when Homer reaches the **Myrmidons**, he pauses: fifty ships, but **Achilles stays by his tents**, furious over Briseis, his men throwing discs on the shore while their horses champ lotus and wild celery, **for lack of leadership not going forth to fight.** The catalogue is not neutral. It tells you what the quarrel has already cost.

Then the **Catalogue of Trojan allies** — Hector and the men of Troy, **Aeneas**, the Lycians under **Sarpedon** and **Glaucus**, contingents from distant hills and rivers, speaking divers tongues. Priam's sons and captains; allies who ignored their seers' warnings and came anyway because fate drew them. Iris warns Priam in Polites' voice; Hector arms the city. The Trojans divide on the plain by the tomb of **Myrine**, horse and foot streaming through the gates.

The book ends with both hosts moving out across the plain. The host marched **like a consuming fire**, and the earth groaned beneath them as they sped toward each other — as it groans when the lord of thunder lashes the land. The war resumes. The names are on the record. The dying has not yet begun in this book, but the memorial is already written, and every captain named is a man you may meet again face-down in the dust.

Plainly

War is not only kings and heroes — it is thousands of names, each with a home behind it. The catalogue is boring until you understand it as grief in advance: a memorial written before the dying starts. And the near-mutiny teaches that **armies are made of people who can decide, in a moment, that the war is not worth their bones.** Book Two.

The line

The armies advancing, as Butler's 1898 prose has it:

> *Thus marched the host like a consuming fire, and the earth groaned beneath them when the lord of thunder is angry and lashes the land about Typhoeus among the Arimi, where they say Typhoeus lies. Even so did the earth groan beneath them as they sped over the plain.*

— Samuel Butler, *The Iliad of Homer* (1898), Book II

`plainly:` *The army moved like wildfire across the plain, and the ground shook under them — the way the earth itself groans when heaven turns angry.*

Book Three — Helen on the Wall

The scene

The two armies stand front to front on the plain, dust wrapping them like a moving cloud, waiting only for command. The Trojans shout; the Greeks move silent, breathing rage, skilled by mutual aid to fix a doubtful field. And then — before the general slaughter — something older than tactics intervenes: the idea that a ten-year war might be settled by **one fight between two men.**

Paris steps forward from the Trojan line, panther-hide on his shoulders, bow and sword at his side, beautiful as a god and knowing it. The Greeks mutter at the sight of him — the thief, the pretty cause of ten years' grief. **Menelaus** sees him and joy goes through him like a hunter who has cornered a stag. Let the Trojans and Greeks sit down their spears. Let the champions fight for **Helen** and all her wealth. Winner takes all; the rest swear peace.

Hector sends for his brother and rebukes him. Paris has brought this ruin; Paris must answer for it. Paris agrees — reluctantly, but he agrees — and the heralds bring lambs and a goatskin of wine for the solemn oaths. **Priam** is driven out through the Scaean gates with **Antenor** beside him; **Agamemnon** and **Ulysses** meet them in the space between the hosts. Hands are washed. Wool is cut from the victims' heads. The kings pray to Zeus and the sun: break the oath-taker's brains as wine is poured to earth.

The duel begins. Menelaus is the better man — stronger, graver, fighting for a wrong he did not invent. His spear shivers through Paris' shield; his sword-stroke cracks the helmet; he seizes Paris by the crest and drags him choking in a circle through the dust. Paris' knees buckle. Menelaus would kill him there if **Aphrodite** did not intervene.

The love-goddess snaps the strap. The helmet comes away empty in Menelaus' hand. She wraps Paris in mist, sets him down in his perfumed bedchamber in Troy, and goes to fetch **Helen**.

Iris finds Helen weaving at her great loom, a double web of the battles Trojans and Greeks have suffered for her sake. She tells her to come and see — your husband and your lover are fighting for you on the plain. Helen hates herself and hates Aphrodite, but she veils herself in white and goes, attended by two handmaids, to the Scaean gates. She walks through Troy like a woman going to her own trial.

On the ramparts of Ilium, the war has become a viewing platform.

There the old men of Troy sit with **Priam** — too old to fight, fluent as cicadas in summer trees. When they see Helen approaching, they do not flatter her. They say, softly to one another, what the whole poem will keep saying in different forms: she is terribly beautiful; she is not worth what Troy is paying.

Priam calls her near. He does not blame her — the gods, he says, are to blame. Then he asks her to name the Greeks ranked below, and Helen becomes a catalogue of another kind: **Agamemnon** like a king, **Ulysses** cunning and plain until he speaks — *when he raised his voice, the words came driving from his deep chest like winter snow before the wind* — **Ajax** a tower among men. She looks for her brothers **Castor** and **Pollux** and cannot find them. She does not know they are already dead at home. The poem lets her grief miss what is true.

Below, Menelaus rages through the field searching for Paris. Agamemnon demands the Trojans honour the oath — restore Helen, pay the blood-price. The Trojans would have given Helen back; the

duel is lost. But the gods have other plans.

Later, when Aphrodite has carried Helen to Paris' chamber, Helen rages at her. *Wretched goddess — you came to me when you stole me from my country; now you protect this coward who would not finish what he began.* She refuses his bed until he has fought again. The Greeks demand Helen; the Trojans know Paris lost. Only the gods stand between settlement and slaughter. The book ends with victory denied and peace unmade. The fragile truce holds only until heaven chooses otherwise.

Plainly

What is beauty worth, and who pays the price? Helen is not a cardboard femme fatale — she hates what she has caused and sees herself clearly on the wall. The old men are not fooled by glamour. War started for one person's desire; the poem makes you look at the cost on the plain while the desired person watches from safety above. Book Three.

The line

The elders on the wall, seeing Helen:

> *Small wonder that Trojans and Achaeans should endure so much and so long for the sake of a woman so marvellously and divinely lovely. Still, fair though she be, let them take her and go, or she will breed sorrow for us and for our children after us.*
>
> — Samuel Butler, *The Iliad of Homer* (1898), Book III

`plainly:` *No wonder men die for her — but even so, give her back, or she will destroy us and our children too.*

Book Four — The Truce Broken

The scene

On Olympus the gods sit with **Zeus** on the golden floor, cups in hand, looking down at Troy. **Hebe** pours nectar. It should be a scene of ease. It is not.

Zeus begins to tease **Hera**, speaking as if the war might end peacefully — Menelaus won the duel; let Helen go back; let Ilium stand. Hera and **Minerva** mutter their discontent. They have sweated for this siege. They will not watch the Trojans keep Helen because Paris was snatched away by Aphrodite at the last moment. Hera bargains with Zeus: let Minerva go down and contrive that the **Trojans break the oath first.**

Minerva needs no urging. She drops from Olympus like a meteor — brilliant, terrible, the armies awestruck below — and takes the form of a Trojan soldier, **Laodocus**, son of **Antenor**. She finds **Pandarus**, the Lycian archer, and whispers the temptation he cannot refuse: shoot Menelaus. Win honour. Make **Paris** grateful. Break the peace in a way Troy will be blamed for, and heaven will call it justice.

Pandarus strings his bow of wild ibex horn, lays the arrow on the string, prays to Apollo, and lets fly. The shaft would have killed Menelaus if Minerva had not turned it at the last instant — guided it to the belt-buckles, through cuirass and mail, grazing the skin so

blood stains his thighs like purple dye on ivory. The wound looks worse than it is. Enough. The truce is void.

The armies had stood still a moment when the meteor-goddess descended; now the killing resumes as though peace had never been attempted.

Agamemnon groans. He holds his brother's hand and fears the worst — then sees the arrow has not gone deep, the barbs still outside the flesh. Relief turns to rage. The Trojans have trampled their oaths. The lambs' blood meant nothing. He had pledged the covenant himself; he had let Menelaus fight for all of them. Now he sends for **Machaon**, son of the healer **Asclepius**, to tend the wound while he prays that Zeus will yet make the perjurers pay with their city, their wives, their children.

Machaon draws the arrow, bends back the barbs, washes the wound, lays on herbs **Chiron** once gave to **Asclepius**. Menelaus will live. The covenant is dead anyway.

While the surgeons work, the Trojans arm and come on again.

This is the first full battle of the poem, and Homer does not ease you into it. Chariots wheel. Spears find throats and nipples and the gaps below the helmet-rim. Men fall named — **Odius**, **Phaesus**, **Scamandrius** the hunter Diana taught, **Phaestus** the shipwright whose craft began the whole mischief. The plain fills with dust so thick you could lose a flock in it. Bronze rings on fallen armour. Blood darkens the earth between the lines.

Agamemnon leaves his chariot and walks the ranks on foot, praising the eager, cursing the slack, driving cowards back into the press. He tells **Idomeneus** he honours him above all at table and in war — now prove it. He blesses the **Ajaxes** when he sees their dark mass of shields moving like storm-cloud. **Nestor** puts timid men in the middle so they must fight whether they will or no, and instructs his charioteers not to break formation for glory. The old man's counsel is practical: this is how towns were taken in the old days, shoulder to shoulder, not by lone heroes seeking names.

The gods take sides from above — **Apollo** and **Ares** with Troy; **Hera** and **Athena** with Greece. **Diomedes** is already rising; he checks **Sthenelus** when hot words fly between captains. **Ulysses** and **Sthenelus** trade insults with Agamemnon until Diomedes restrains his comrade — the king may rage, but the line must hold. Dust and shouting and the terrible efficiency of bronze-age killing fill the plain.

And somewhere by the ships, out of the battle's music, **Achilles** sits in his anger — the greatest warrior in the world, not fighting, while the host he swore to abandon bleeds for the king who shamed him.

Plainly

Peace can be destroyed by a single act, and often an act no mortal intended. The truce was real; the gods broke it because the story requires war. For a human reader the sharper truth: **the moment both sides have something to lose, someone always finds a reason to resume the harm.** Book Four.

The line

When the fighting renews, Idomeneus names what has happened:

> *Urge on the other Achaeans, that we may join battle at once, for the Trojans have trampled upon their covenants. Death and destruction shall be theirs, seeing they have been the first to break their oaths and to attack us.*
>
> — Samuel Butler, *The Iliad of Homer* (1898), Book IV

`plainly:` *Push the men forward — the Trojans have broken their sworn peace. Let them pay for attacking first.*

Book Five — The Aristeia of Diomedes

The scene

With **Achilles** absent, another Greek must carry the day — and this book belongs to **Diomedes**, son of **Tydeus**, young, ferocious, suddenly favoured by **Athena** as his father was before him. Tydeus was one of the seven against Thebes; his son has come to Troy to prove the bloodline still runs hot.

The goddess kindles fire on his shield and helmet — bright as the star that shines after bathing in Ocean — and sends him into the thickest fight. The Trojans see the flame and hesitate. He is not a man they have learned to fear yet; they will. He kills **Phegeus** and **Idaeus**, sons of the priest **Dares**; Vulcan snatches the survivor away in darkness. The Trojans reel. Athena takes **Mars** by the hand and leads the war-god off the field so men may fight men without the bane of cities standing over them.

Then the book becomes Diomedes' **aristeia** — his day of supreme excellence.

He moves like a winter torrent that has burst its banks, no wall of vineyard holding it back. He cuts through ranks. He kills **Astynous**, **Abas**, **Xanthus** and **Thoon** — two sons whose old father will divide his wealth among kinsmen because neither son comes home. He springs on **Echemmon** and **Chromius**, sons of Priam, and strips

their chariot. The field begins to tilt — not enough to win the war, but enough to show what one man can do when heaven favours him.

Pandarus wounds him — the same archer who broke the truce — and Diomedes retreats to his chariot, pulls the arrow from his shoulder, and prays:

Goddess, if you ever stood by my father in battle, stand by me now.

Athena hears. She heals his limbs, quickens his hands, and — this is the astonishing part — **lifts the veil from his eyes** so he can know gods and mortals apart. Fight men, she says. But if **Aphrodite** comes, strike her. Wound her. No other immortal — only the daughter of Zeus who loves Paris' cause.

Diomedes goes back three times fiercer. He meets **Aeneas**, beloved of Venus, and drives at him though Apollo stands guard. Thrice he rushes; thrice Apollo beats back his shield. He kills **Pandarus** at last — the man who broke the truce — and the Trojans scatter from him as sheep from a lion.

When Aphrodite snatches her wounded son away, Diomedes drives his spear into the goddess' wrist. Ichor — immortal blood — flows. Aphrodite flees to Olympus and weeps in her mother **Dione's** lap while the gods trade stories of mortals who have hurt immortals before: **Mars** bound in a bronze jar for thirteen months, **Juno** wounded by **Hercules**, **Hades** pierced even at the gates of hell. Even gods bruise. Diomedes has crossed the line mortals are not supposed to cross — and the poem lets him.

Apollo takes up Aeneas. Diomedes charges again. **Ares** enters the fray on the Trojan side in his chariot, furious, shouting for Trojans to fight for **Sarpedon's** city and not let the Greeks take **Troy** while he is absent. And still Diomedes does not flinch. Guided by Athena, he drives his bronze into the war-god's flank. Mars howls as loud as ten thousand men, flees to Olympus, and sits begging **Paeeon** to heal him while Hera and Athena mock Jove from the sidelines.

It is the most dazzling fighting in the early poem — god-striking,

rank-breaking, fearless past what mortals are supposed to attempt. And it is possible only because **Achilles is not there.**

Homer shows you what "good enough" looks like — **Agamemnon** killing chiefs on foot, **Idomeneus** spear-true, **Menelaus** hunting down the man who taught him archery, **Ajax** holding the line while the Myrmidons play at discus by the ships — so you will feel the scale of what is missing. Diomedes is magnificent. The war still turns. Some gaps in a host are not fillable by excellence alone.

Plainly

Excellence is real, and it is not enough. Diomedes is magnificent — brave, clever, god-backed — and the war still turns. There are problems in a system that depend on one irreplaceable person, and problems that no amount of second-best can solve. Book Five.

The line

Diomedes, encouraged by Athena:

> *Hear me, daughter of aegis-bearing Jove, unweariable, if ever you loved my father well and stood by him in the thick of a fight, do the like now by me; grant me to come within a spear's throw of that man and kill him.*
>
> — Samuel Butler, *The Iliad of Homer* (1898), Book V

`plainly:` *Goddess, if you ever helped my father in battle, help me now — let me close on that man and kill him.*

Book Six — Hector and Andromache

The scene

The battle has become a river of blood between **Scamander** and **Simois**. Men fall so fast Homer names them in bursts — **Acamas**, **Axylus** the hospitable rich man whose open door could not save him, twin sons of a naiad and a king's bastard, **Adrastus** begging for ransom and denied by Agamemnon's fury. The Greeks press toward the walls.

Helenus, Troy's seer, reads the divine weather and tells **Hector** what must be done: return to the city. Bid the queen and the Trojan matrons process to **Athena's** temple with the largest mantle in the royal wardrobes and twelve heifers for sacrifice — perhaps the goddess will hold **Diomedes** back, who mows whole troops as **Achilles** never quite did in these weeks. It is a desperate prayer. Hector obeys. He leaps from his chariot, fires the Trojans with a last shout, and strides for Ilium, shield at his back, bronze ringing, the whole city waiting for the man who is already half a ghost.

The field pauses when he leaves — and in that pause Homer gives us the scene that makes strangers weep.

Glaucus and **Diomedes** meet between the armies. They challenge each other, then discover their grandfathers were **guest-friends** in the old world of hospitality. Glaucus tells the long tale of

Bellerophon — the hero who bore the gods' signs, who was sent to kill the **Chimaera**, who was betrayed by a king's wife and nearly destroyed by letters carried in a folded tablet — and how **Proetus** and **Bellerophon** exchanged tokens of friendship between their houses. So Glaucus and Diomedes exchange armour: golden for bronze, and Homer notes dryly that Zeus stole Glaucus' wits that day. Then they return to opposite sides and try to kill each other anyway, because war overrides friendship when the lines are drawn.

Hector passes through the city. Women ask after brothers and husbands; he sends them to pray. He cannot find **Andromache** at home — she has already run to the wall with the nurse and the child, hearing the Greeks press hard. At the Scaean gates she comes running to meet him, breathless, the nurse behind her with the boy in her arms.

She is not a symbol. She is a woman with a history the poem remembers.

Her father **Eetion** ruled in **Thebe** under wooded **Placus**; **Achilles** killed him when he sacked the city, burned him in his armour, raised a barrow, and the mountain nymphs planted elms. Her seven brothers died the same day, cut down with their flocks. Her mother was brought to Troy as spoil and ransomed, then **Diana** took her — in **Priam's house**, while she was a guest under Hector's roof. Andromache has only Hector left — father, mother, brother, husband in one person.

She begs him not to go back. Stay on the wall. Think of the child. She has watched where the Greeks assault thickest — below the fig-tree, where the wall is weakest — and names the captains who come there: both **Ajaxes**, **Idomeneus**, both sons of **Atreus**, **Diomedes**. She is not guessing. She has been on the ramparts, watching the war that will take him, while he has been on the plain trying to hold it back.

Hector answers, and the answer is why the *Iliad* is not only an Achilles poem.

He knows Troy will fall. He grieves — but not most for Priam or Hecuba or his brothers. He grieves for **her**, when some Greek carries her away weeping, when she works another woman's loom in Argos or fetches water from **Messeis** or **Hypereia** under a cruel hand, and someone says, *That was Hector's wife — the bravest man at Troy*. He prays he may die under his barrow before he hears that cry.

He stretched his arms towards his child — **Astyanax**, *lord of the city*, because his father alone holds Ilium up — but the boy cried and nestled in his nurse's bosom, scared at the sight of his father's armour, and at the horse-hair plume that nodded fiercely from his helmet. His father and mother laughed to see him, but Hector took the helmet from his head and laid it all gleaming upon the ground. Then he took his darling child, kissed him, and dandled him in his arms, praying over him the while to Jove and to all the gods:

Let this boy be even as I am — chief among Trojans, strong, fit to rule Ilium — and may someone say of him, coming from battle, "The son is far better than the father."

For a moment on the wall there is only the child, the parents, and the bronze laid aside. Then war takes the father back.

He gives the child back. He tells Andromache to go home and tend her loom and her servants. **War is man's matter, and mine above all others born in Ilius.** He takes up his helmet. She goes, looking back again and again along the way he will walk, and at home orders her maidens to mourn him **while he is still alive**, because they believe they will never see him return.

Inside the house the women raise the dirge for a living man. On the plain the killing continues.

Hector finds **Paris** at last, still in his chamber, bitter with shame, polishing his armour as though armour were the hard part. The Trojans speak ill of him; Hector grieves for it. *You fight bravely when you fight — but you are careless, and your absence costs us.* Brother to brother: let us go back. If Zeus grants deliverance, we will make things right afterward. Paris brightens like sunlight, dons his bronze,

and they pass together through the gates — welcome as a breeze to sailors who have longed for wind — while **Hector** leads and **Paris** follows, and the battle takes them again.

A helmet laid in the dust so a child will stop screaming at his father's face. A wife walking home, mourning a living husband. The life the war is destroying, shown whole, before it is destroyed.

Plainly

A good man who knows he will lose, fighting anyway because the life he owes his city is the only life he can live without shame. Hector is not Achilles — he has no divine invulnerability, no choice of glory or long life. He has a wife, a child, and the certainty of ruin. The scene on the wall is what the war is destroying, shown to you before it is destroyed. Book Six.

The line

Hector to Andromache:

> *I too have thought upon all this, but with what face should I look upon the Trojans, men or women, if I shirked battle like a coward? I cannot do so: I know nothing save to fight bravely in the forefront of the Trojan host and win renown alike for my father and myself. Well do I know that the day will surely come when mighty Ilius shall be destroyed with Priam and Priam's people, but I grieve for none of these—not even for Hecuba, nor King Priam, nor for my brothers many and brave who may fall in the dust before their foes—for none of these do I grieve as for yourself when the day shall come on which some one of the Achaeans shall rob you for ever of your freedom, and bear you weeping*

> *away.*
>
> — Samuel Butler, *The Iliad of Homer* (1898), Book VI

`plainly:` *I've thought of what you say — but how could I face Troy if I hid like a coward? I only know how to fight in front. I know the city will fall — yet what breaks me is picturing you enslaved, weeping, taken away.*

Book Seven — Hector and Ajax

The scene

The battle has been grinding all day, and both armies are tired in the way that only a tenth-year siege can make men tired — not fresh fear, but the dull exhaustion of men who have killed and been killed so often that the plain itself feels used up. Bodies litter the field from earlier fighting; dust hangs in the heat; the noise of bronze has become the day's weather. Then **Hector** steps forward.

He has been sent, Homer tells us, by the gods themselves. Apollo and Minerva meet by the oak tree and agree to pause the general slaughter for a day; let one champion from each side settle the matter in the open, man against man. Helenus, Priam's son, hears their counsel and brings it to Hector: challenge the best Greek you can find. Hector does. He walks between the armies with his spear held crosswise, stilling the ranks, and calls out terms that are almost courtly. If he falls, strip his armour and send his body home for fire and burial. If he wins, he will hang the dead man's arms in Apollo's temple and return the corpse to the ships. The Greeks will remember the spot, he says, and sailors passing Hellespont will point and say: *a valiant Greek lies here, slain by Hector.*

Silence. Menelaus, shamed, nearly goes himself; Agamemnon holds him back. Nestor rises — the old voice of memory — and rebukes a whole generation for having no stomach. Nine princes stand. They

cast lots. The lot falls to **Ajax**, son of Telamon: the huge, stolid defender, not swift like Achilles, not royal like Agamemnon, but the man the army trusts to stand.

Ajax arms. He comes forward bearing a shield like a wall — seven folds of ox-hide, an eighth layer of bronze — and tells Hector that Achilles is not the only champion Greece has. Hector answers that he knows blood and butchery, and will not take a great man unawares. They throw spears. Hector's point punches through six layers of Ajax's shield and stops in the seventh. Ajax's spear drives through Hector's shield and cuirass and pierces the shirt at his side; Hector swerves and lives. Then they close like lions or boars, hacking with spears, then with stones — Hector's boulder ringing on the bronze boss of Ajax's shield, Ajax answering with a millstone of a rock that breaks Hector's shield inward and drops him flat, until Apollo lifts him up again. They would have gone at each other with swords if the heralds had not come — Talthybius for the Greeks, Idaeus for Troy — and stopped them for nightfall.

What happens next is one of the poem's quiet astonishments. These two men, who have spent the afternoon trying to kill each other, **exchange gifts**. Hector gives Ajax a silver-studded sword with sheath and baldric. Ajax gives him a girdle dyed with purple. They part in friendship, each side cheering its champion home.

The armies sit while Hector speaks, bristling with shield and helmet and spear, Homer says, like a wind-furrowed sea gone dark and still. For a few hours the killing stops because two men agreed to try each other honestly.

Then the work of war resumes its other face. Nestor urges a truce to burn the dead. The Trojans hold council: Antenor says give Helen back; Paris refuses the woman but offers to return her wealth. Priam sends a herald; Agamemnon will not take Helen, but agrees to a pause for funerals. Oxen and mules drag the pyres. Smoke rises from the plain.

And then the Greeks do something new. At Nestor's urging they

build a wall — a ditch, a rampart, gates for the chariots, stakes driven sharp along the lip. For the first time in the campaign they fortify the camp. It is practical work, done with sweat and timber, and Homer notes what the Greeks do not: they build without hecatombs to the gods. Neptune will remember that. Apollo will remember it. For now it stands — a Greek wall facing a Trojan city — two civilisations mirroring each other across a field of ash and bone. The Trojans camp on the open plain. Both sides feast — the Greeks under their new fortification, the Trojans with watchful joy because their champion returned unharmed. Jupiter sends thunder over Troy as a sign of wrath, unsettling hearts even in victory. Tomorrow the killing continues. But tonight, for a little while, two enemies wear each other's gifts — sword and purple girdle — and the poem remembers that war is not only rage; it is also the strange courtesy of men who know they will meet again.

Plainly

Honour between enemies can survive an afternoon of trying to kill each other — the duel as an alternative to massacre, gifts exchanged when neither can win outright. The Greeks' wall against Troy's walls: two ways of holding ground, two kinds of pride, with the same dead between them.

The line

Butler's 1898 prose, when the duel ends:

> *On this he gave Ajax a silver-studded sword with its sheath and leathern baldric, and in return Ajax gave him a girdle dyed with purple. Thus they parted, the one going to the host of the Achaeans, and the other to that of the Trojans, who rejoiced when they saw their*

> *hero come to them safe and unharmed from the strong hands of mighty Ajax.*
>
> — Samuel Butler, *The Iliad of Homer* (1898), Book VII (Gutenberg #2199)

`plainly:` *They tried to kill each other until dark, then traded sword and belt and walked away — and each army treated its man as though he had won.*

Book Eight — Zeus Holds the Scales

The scene

Morning comes saffron-robed, and **Zeus** calls the gods to council on the highest crest of Olympus. What he says is the kind of speech that ends argument: none of you, god or goddess, will cross me today. Help Troy or help Greece and I will hurl you down to Tartarus so far beneath the earth that you will learn what my power means. He offers, almost casually, the image of a golden chain — all the gods of heaven tugging one way, he pulling the other, and earth and sea coming with him. They are frightened. They hold their peace.

Minerva asks leave only to advise the Greeks in whispers, not to fight in the open. Zeus smiles and agrees — the gods will watch, not touch, and the mortals will learn what a day without divine rescue feels like. Then he yokes his bronze-hoofed horses, drives to Ida, hides them in cloud, and sits on the mountaintop looking down at Troy and the ships — the whole chessboard in one view, as calm as a man watching ants destroy each other.

The armies come out again. Shield clashes on shield. The earth runs red. For a while the fight is even, as it has been on many days. Then, at **midday**, the father of gods balances his golden scales and puts two fates of death inside — one for Troy, one for Greece. He lifts the balance. The Achaeans' scale sinks to the ground. The Trojan scale rises toward heaven. Thunder rolls from Ida. Lightning flares

on the plain. Pale fear goes through the Greek ranks.

What follows is a rout in slow motion, and Homer makes you feel each man's break. Idomeneus will not stand. Agamemnon goes. The two Ajaxes, servants of Mars, give ground. Even **Nestor** — Nestor, bulwark of the Achaeans — is trapped because a Trojan arrow has struck his horse in the head, and only Diomed's shout brings Ulysses back long enough for the old king to mount another chariot and flee. Diomed wants to stay and die rather than hear Hector boast that he ran; Nestor tells him the Trojans will not believe it, but the sky keeps speaking for Troy — thunder three times from Ida as Diomed wavers.

The rout has a geography. You can follow it on the page: past the wall, down the slope of the plain, along the bodies of men who fell trying to stand, until the sea itself seems to shrink the army into a strip of ships and sand. Hector rages at the trench the Greeks dug only yesterday. He calls his horses by name and promises them Andromache's corn and wine if they carry him to the ships; he will bring fire. The Greeks are driven **past their new wall**, down the slope, along the beach, all the way to the **ships** — packed at the water's edge while Trojans press from the plain. Hera and Athena, forbidden to intervene, weep on Olympus; Hera would move Neptune against Zeus's order, but Iris turns them back. For a moment it looks as though the war could end here, ten years undone in an afternoon, because the greatest fighter on the Greek side sits in his tent and will not come out.

Teucer, from Ajax's ship, keeps shooting; Hector smashes his bow and drives him off with a stone. Eurypylus is wounded. The Greeks are pushed until they cling to the sterns of the beached vessels like men clutching a cliff edge. Agamemnon, in despair, offers full restitution to Achilles in his heart — treasure, honour, the return of the girl — but the embassy does not go yet. That is tomorrow's book. Tonight the army learns what Achilles's absence costs in flesh. Tonight Hector holds council on the plain. He wished darkness had not come so soon; he would have burned the ships already. He orders watchfires — a thousand fires, fifty men around each, horses champing beside

the chariots — so that the plain between Troy and the river glows like a second city, and any Greek looking out from the beach sees the scale of what tomorrow must face. The sacrifice-smoke rises; the blessed gods partook not thereof, Homer adds — Troy is still hated on Olympus even when Troy is winning. The Greeks huddle at the sea, close enough to hear the surf. Achilles sits apart with his Myrmidons, still not fighting — the poem keeps that wound visible even while the wall is breached in spirit. Trojan fire on the plain, Greeks at the ships, and Zeus's promise to Thetis fulfilled one terrible degree at a time.

Plainly

When the indispensable person walks away, the institution discovers how indispensable they were. Achilles sits in his tent while the army is driven to the ships — Zeus keeping his promise to Thetis, the nadir before tomorrow's embassy written in flesh and rout.

The line

Butler's 1898 prose, when the scales turn:

> *When Jove had thus said, the Trojans raised a shout of triumph, and placed their bodies under cover of their shields, while the Achaeans fled in fear and confusion.*
>
> — Samuel Butler, *The Iliad of Homer* (1898), Book VIII (Gutenberg #2199)

`plainly:` *The Trojans roared and pressed forward; the Greeks broke and ran — because heaven had weighed their fates, and the weight was against them.*

Book Nine — The Embassy to Achilles

The scene

While the Trojans keep their watchfires on the plain, **Panic** — comrade of blood-stained Rout — takes hold of the Achaeans. Homer compares their hearts to a sea suddenly whipped by the north and northwest wind: dark waves rearing, wreckage scattered. Agamemnon calls a council. He weeps openly, as Butler has it, like a cataract on a cliff face, and says what despair sounds like when a king says it aloud: Jove promised me Troy; Jove has played me false; let us sail home. For a long while no one answers.

Then **Diomed** speaks — young, furious, precise. He tells Agamemnon to his face that the gods gave him authority but not valour, that if the king wants to go he may, but the rest will stay until Ilius falls; he and Sthenelus alone if need be. The army applauds. **Nestor** rises. He rebukes Agamemnon for the quarrel with Achilles, for taking Briseis against Nestor's own advice; he tells the king to feast his counsellors and prepare gifts. Agamemnon, broken, agrees. He admits blindness and passion. He lists what he will give: seven tripods never yet on the fire, ten talents of gold, twenty cauldrons, twelve prize-winning horses, seven Lesbian workwomen of surpassing beauty, the return of **Briseis untouched**, with a great oath that he never went up into her couch; and if Troy falls, spoil at the division, twenty Trojan women after Helen, marriage to a daughter with

cities for dowry — Cardamyle, Enope, Hire, Pherae, Anthea, Aepea, Pedasus — seven well-established towns near the sea. Let Achilles forgive. Let him fight.

Nestor names the embassy: **Phoenix**, who nursed Achilles; **Ajax**; **Odysseus**; heralds with them. They walk along the sounding sea, praying to earth-encircling Neptune. The camp they pass is dying for want of one man. They find Achilles in his hut — a scene unlike any other in the poem. He is **singing to the lyre**, entertaining himself with the feats of heroes, the spoils of Eetion's city on his knees. Patroclus sits opposite, silent, waiting. The contrast is almost unbearable: war is at the ships; Achilles is making music, as though the embassy were a social call and not a last plea before fire.

He greets them warmly — *you are dearest to me of the Achaeans despite my anger* — and orders a feast. Patroclus roasts meat; they eat; they drink. Then **Odysseus** pledges Achilles and delivers Agamemnon's offer, word for word: the treasure, the oath, the daughter, the cities, the plea to save the fleet from burning, the reminder of what Peleus told him when he left Phthia — check your temper, eschew vain quarrelling. And the bait at the end: you might even kill Hector; he is infatuated and will come within your reach.

Achilles's answer is the moral earthquake of the *Iliad*. Butler's 1898 prose:

He will not be cajoled. He hates the man who says one thing and hides another in his heart — and Agamemnon is that man. The one who fights fares no better than the one who sits idle; coward and hero share equal honour; death takes both. He has given everything to Agamemnon — twelve cities by sea, eleven by land — and received little back, while Agamemnon kept the woman in whom he delighted. Why should the Argives fight for Helen? Are the sons of Atreus the only men who love their wives? He loves Briseis — *a fruitling of his spear* — and Agamemnon took her and played him false. Let Agamemnon look to others to save his ships. The wall and trench will not hold Hector; when Achilles fought, Hector did not pass the Scaean gates; now he raves at the ships. Tomorrow Achilles will

sacrifice and **sail for Phthia**. Tell the army in public, so they may hate Agamemnon.

Not gold like Orchomenus or Egyptian Thebes with its hundred gates. Not gifts like sand or dust. Not marriage to a daughter fair as Venus. **His life is more to him than all the wealth of Ilius** — cattle and tripods can be bought; life, once gone, cannot. And then the line every reader remembers:

> *My mother Thetis tells me that there are two ways in which I may meet my end. If I stay here and fight, I shall not return alive but my name will live for ever: whereas if I go home my name will die, but it will be long ere death shall take me.*

He has chosen fame — but not for Agamemnon's price. Phoenix may sleep in his hut; he will not be taken by force.

Phoenix weeps. He tells his own story: exiled from his father for a quarrel over a concubine; raised by Peleus; made Achilles a son when he had none; fed him from his knee. He tells the story of **Meleager**, who refused to fight while his city burned, angered with his mother, until his wife described captured women and children and the fire at the gates — then he armoured and saved Calydon, but received none of the rewards promised earlier. Pride that waits for catastrophe, Phoenix says, often yields too late. Take the gifts now.

Achilles refuses. Honour from Jove abides at his ships while his limbs are strong. Do not vex him with weeping for Agamemnon's sake. Phoenix may stay or sail; the others must take his answer.

Ajax speaks last — plain, hurt, almost gentle. They must carry unwelcome news to men waiting at the ships. Achilles is savage and remorseless; he cares nothing for the love his comrades lavished on him. Other men accept blood-money for a slain brother or son; Achilles, over one girl, keeps a wicked unforgiving spirit though they offer seven of the best and more beside. Respect the hospitality of your own roof.

Achilles answers that Ajax has spoken to his liking — but his blood boils when he remembers Agamemnon's contumely **as though I were some vile tramp, in the presence of the Argives**. He will not fight until **Hector reaches the tents of the Myrmidons** and flings fire on his ships. Let Hector try.

They drink and leave. Patroclus makes Phoenix a bed. The envoys walk back through the dark, carrying an answer the army already dreads. The Greeks eat a grim supper. Pragmatist, father, comrade — none of the three pleas worked. Tomorrow will be worse.

Plainly

Some injuries are to the self, not the wallet — wounded honour cannot be healed with gifts. Achilles's refusal is unreasonable by modern standards and perfectly coherent by Homer's. Phoenix warns that **pride that waits for catastrophe before yielding often yields too late.** Achilles does not hear it yet.

The line

Achilles to the embassy — Butler's 1898 prose:

> *My mother Thetis tells me that there are two ways in which I may meet my end. If I stay here and fight, I shall not return alive but my name will live for ever: whereas if I go home my name will die, but it will be long ere death shall take me.*
>
> — Samuel Butler, *The Iliad of Homer* (1898), Book IX (Gutenberg #2199)

And Ajax, when all pleading fails:

> *Achilles is savage and remorseless; he is cruel, and cares nothing for the love his comrades lavished upon*

> *him more than on all the others.*
>
> — Samuel Butler, *The Iliad of Homer* (1898), Book IX (Gutenberg #2199)

`plainly:` *Stay and die famous, or go home and live long in obscurity — I chose fame. But not for Agamemnon's price. And my friends' love cannot move me while the insult still burns.*

Book Ten — The Night Raid

The scene

The princes sleep; **Agamemnon** does not. He lies in his tent like a man at sea without a helm — looking at the Trojan watchfires on the plain, hearing pipes and flutes and the hum of a host that thinks victory is near, then turning toward the ships and tearing his hair before Zeus. The king who offered to sail home at dawn now walks the camp in a lion's skin, because leadership at this hour means insomnia and fear worn as armour. He rises, takes his spear, and goes. Menelaus, sleepless for the same reasons, finds him arming by his ship. The brothers agree: someone must spy on Troy before dawn.

Nestor is awake too — armour laid by his bed, the old man who never seems to rest though his age would excuse sleep. Agamemnon finds him; they rouse **Diomedes** and **Odysseus**, then Ajax and others. They walk the line of sentinels, heartening the guards, checking that exhaustion has not undone what fear could not. Beyond the trench, in a clear space where Hector turned back at nightfall, they hold council. Nestor asks who will dare go into the Trojan camp and bring back word — or cut off a straggler. Fame like heaven, he says, and a black ewe with her lamb from every captain.

Silence — until Diomedes volunteers, if another will go with him. Several offer; Diomedes chooses Odysseus, saying he already trusts him from the day they went together as envoys into Troy — a memory that makes the night work feel of a piece with the poem's larger world

of guest-gifts and violated hospitality. They pray to Athena, arm in boar-tusk helmets, take swords and shields, and slip into the dark like wolves leaving a den.

What follows is darker in tone than the books around it — more cynical, different in texture. Scholars differ on whether it belongs to the same hand; this companion will not adjudicate. What the text gives us is unmistakable: **war's dirty work**, done by the two cleverest Greeks, with the gods' favour and no honourable witness.

They lie among the corpses. **Dolon** passes — son of Eumedes, ugly, swift, an only son among five sisters, hungry for reward. His father is rich in gold and bronze; Dolon wants the horses of Achilles because Hector promised them. He wears a wolf-skin and a ferret cap; he runs lightly, already tasting triumph. Hector has promised him Achilles's chariot and horses if he scouts the Greek line. Hector swears the oath on his sceptre; Dolon runs, and Homer tells us plainly the oath was bootless — he was not to return with news. The two Greeks chase him like hounds after a hare. Athena gives Diomedes strength to be first. Dolon begs for life, offers ransom — gold, bronze, wrought iron in his father's house. Odysseus questions him calmly. Dolon tells everything: Hector and the councillors at the tomb of Ilus; watchfires but lax allies; the **Thracians** newly arrived, camped apart, their king **Rhesus** with horses whiter than snow and armour too splendid for a mortal.

Odysseus smiles. When Dolon has told the whole story, **Diomedes strikes him in the middle of the neck with his sword**, cuts through both sinews, and his head falls rolling in the dust **while he was yet speaking**. They take his wolf-skin, his ferret cap, his bow, hang the spoils on a tamarisk for Athena, and go on.

At the Thracian camp men sleep exhausted, armour on the ground, horses tethered in rows white as snow. Diomedes kills twelve where they lie; Odysseus drives the best horses out. Athena rouses the team for them. They ride back with Rhesus's chariot before dawn, greeted by the anxious princes, who sacrifice and feast on the spoils while the east lightens.

Plainly

This too is how sieges are survived — spies, lies, killing a man who pleaded for his life. Not every deed in the poem is noble. The same army that sends an embassy by day sends knives by night, and Homer includes the night raid without flinching.

The line

Butler's 1898 prose:

> *On this Dolon would have caught him by the beard to beseech him further, but Diomed struck him in the middle of his neck with his sword and cut through both sinews so that his head fell rolling in the dust while he was yet speaking.*
>
> — Samuel Butler, *The Iliad of Homer* (1898), Book X (Gutenberg #2199)

`plainly:` *Dolon talked; Diomedes cut off his head mid-sentence — after he had told them everything they needed to know.*

Book Eleven — Agamemnon's Day, Then Wounds

The scene

Dawn rises beside Tithonus, and Zeus sends **Discord** to the middle of the Greek line with war in her hands. Her cry fills the Achaeans with heart to stay and fight rather than sail for home. The battle opens again — and for a while, unexpectedly, **Agamemnon** is magnificent.

Homer spends lines on his armour as though the king were a god: the breastplate Cinyras gave him, ten courses of dark cyanus, twelve of gold, ten of tin; serpents rearing on the shield; the Gorgon's head with Rout and Panic beside it. Red dew falls on the plain — a portent that many brave men will go down to Hades before evening. Juno and Minerva thunder in his honour. He leaves his chariot, fights on foot, and cuts through the Trojan ranks like fire through a forest. He kills Bienor and Oileus, Isus and Antiphus, sons of Priam; he takes the sons of Antimachus alive and, when they beg ransom, remembers Antimachus wanted Menelaus and Odysseus murdered as envoys — and **kills them**. The Trojans run like cattle when a lion takes one at night. Agamemnon drives them past the tomb of Ilus, past the wild fig-tree, to the Scaean gates and the oak tree. For a morning, the king who failed at diplomacy succeeds at war.

Then Zeus intervenes. Iris carries word to **Hector**: hold back until Agamemnon is wounded and leaves the field; then drive on until the ships. The instruction is surgical — even Troy's champion is on a leash until heaven says otherwise. Coon, Antenor's son, gashes Agamemnon's arm beneath the elbow; the king fights on, kills Coon, but the pain tells and he mounts his chariot and retreats. The tide turns as if a door had closed.

Hector surges. The Greeks who held now break. Paris's arrow finds **Diomedes** in the foot; he retreats from the plain cursing the archer. **Odysseus**, holding alone in the front until he is wounded in the thigh, is saved only when Menelaus and Ajax stand over him while he limps away — a rare image of the cleverest Greek reduced to needing rescue. **Machaon**, the healer, is hit by Paris's arrow; without him the camp loses more than a soldier. Nestor himself drives him off in his chariot toward the ships, the old king doubling as ambulance driver while the battle roars on. **Ajax** fights on, but the centre cannot hold. The wall still stands; the men behind it do not.

Achilles, from his ship, watches. He sees the chariot pass — Nestor driving Machaon — and sends **Patroclus** to ask who was wounded. It is a small courtesy, asking after the hurt, and yet it keeps Patroclus moving through the very camp that is coming apart. Patroclus runs along the line of ships. At Odysseus's assembly ground he meets **Eurypylus**, shot in the thigh, black blood welling; Patroclus pities him, cuts out the arrow, crushes a bitter herb Chiron taught, and binds the wound. But first he must reach Achilles — and on the way back he will pass **Nestor**.

The old king receives him with honey and wine and a speech that is one of the poem's great engines of fate. Nestor remembers his youth — the fight by the river Celadon, the Pylians against the Arcadians, killing the champion Ereuthalion when no one else would face him. *I was the youngest then,* he says; *now none of you has stomach for Hector.* He recalls the day he and Odysseus came to Peleus's house recruiting; how **Menoetius** charged Patroclus to counsel Achilles, for Achilles is nobler but Patroclus is older. And then, carefully, the

suggestion: if Achilles will not fight, **perhaps Patroclus will** — lead the Myrmidons, wear Achilles's armour, so the Trojans may mistake him and the Greeks may breathe. Fresh men might drive a tired enemy back from the tents.

Patroclus's heart moves. He runs to Achilles with Nestor's message — and Homer has already shown us the wound Eurypylus needed tending, the armour waiting in the hut, the pride still locked behind the Myrmidons' line. **The seed of disaster is planted.**

Plainly

When love for a friend pushes you toward the very danger you were sent to avoid, the centre cannot hold. One hero after another leaves the field while the man who could stop it watches from the shore and sends his dearest friend out into the dying light.

The line

Nestor to Patroclus — Butler's 1898 prose:

> *If, however, he is fearful about some oracle, or if his mother has told him something from Jove, then let him send you, and let the rest of the Myrmidons follow with you, if perchance you may bring light and saving to the Danaans. And let him send you into battle clad in his own armour, that the Trojans may mistake you for him and leave off fighting.*
>
> — Samuel Butler, *The Iliad of Homer* (1898), Book XI (Gutenberg #2199)

`plainly:` *If Achilles won't fight, maybe you can — in his armour, with his men — and give the army one more hour of air.*

Book Twelve — Assault on the Wall

The scene

Patroclus tends Eurypylus in the tent, but on the plain the war does not pause. The **trench** and **wall** — so newly built, so unhallowed by sacrifice — must bear what they were made for. Hector rages at the ditch as though offended by the very idea that Greeks might defend themselves; he calls the fortification weak and worthless, yet it kills his hours and breaks his chariot line before the real work begins. **Polydamas**, Hector's wise counsellor, urges what prudence looks like: leave the chariots, cross on foot in companies, do not cram men into a killing ground. Hector listens — for once — and the Trojans dismount. Five bodies of infantry form; the best and bravest follow Hector and Polydamas toward the wall.

Homer tells us plainly what the Greeks forgot: they built without the consent of the immortals. Neptune and Apollo will one day wash the wall into the sea when Troy is dust — rivers turned against the timbers, the Hellespont spread with sand where the ramparts stood. For now it holds — until it does not. The Trojans had never needed such a wall; Ilium's towers were always there. The Greeks, camped on foreign sand, tried to make home out of earthworks and hope.

The assault is chaos made visible. Stones fall thick as snowflakes from defenders on the ramparts; helmet and shield ring under the barrage until the whole wall is in an uproar. Asius tries the gates with

his chariot and dies for his rashness; the Lapithae Polypoetes and Leonteus stand like oak trees and break the first wave. But numbers tell. **Sarpedon**, son of Zeus, captain of the Lycians, climbs where chariots could not go. He and Glaucus tear at the battlements; Ajax and Teucer answer from above, shooting from behind the shields of the Locrians. The fight balances awhile like a woman weighing wool in a scale — even, terrible, minute by minute — until Jove gives the greater glory to Hector. An eagle crosses the Trojans with a blood-red snake in its talons; the snake strikes the bird; the omen falls into the host. Polydamas reads it as warning; Hector presses on. This is his hour, and the poem will not slow him yet.

Zeus turns the scale again. Sarpedon lifts a comrade over the parapet; the Greeks give ground. Hector picks up a **stone** that lay just outside the gates — thick at one end, pointed at the other — a boulder two modern men could hardly heave onto a wagon. Hector lifts it alone; the son of scheming Saturn made it light for him. As a shepherd picks up a ram's fleece with one hand, Butler writes, so easily did Hector drive the great stone at the **double gates** with their cross-bars and single key. The hinges break. The bars hold no longer. The doors fly open. Hector leaps inside, face dark as flying night, bronze gleaming, two spears in his hand, eyes like fire — **none but a god could have withstood him**. He turns and shouts for Troy to come through.

The Trojans pour onto the Greek side of the fortification for the first time. Some scale the wall; others pass the gates. The Danaans flee toward the **ships** — uproar, confusion, the thing Achilles swore he would wait for now happening without him in the field. Smoke from the broken gate; the Myrmidons' line closer now than yesterday.

Plainly

Walls are symbols until they fall; then they are rubble, and the war is at the water's edge. Hector's strength is real — it carries him toward the encounter Achilles's wrath has been waiting for.

The line

Butler's 1898 prose:

> *Hector laid hold of a stone that lay just outside the gates and was thick at one end but pointed at the other; two of the best men in a town, as men now are, could hardly raise it from the ground and put it on to a waggon, but Hector lifted it quite easily by himself, for the son of scheming Saturn made it light for him.*
>
> — Samuel Butler, *The Iliad of Homer* (1898), Book XII (Gutenberg #2199)

`plainly:` *Hector picked up a gate-stone two ordinary men could barely load on a cart, and threw it through the hinges — with heaven making the weight less than it should have been.*

Book Thirteen — The Battle at the Ships

The scene

The Trojans have crossed the wall. **Hector** is at the ships — not near them, not threatening them, but *in among them*, and the Greek camp has become a killing ground between timber hulls and the sea.

There is no one clean duel to follow here. The fighting is **crowded** — spears, chariots, names falling faster than a newcomer can track, men pushed back until the surf itself fights them. This is what Achilles's absence feels like on the ground: not an empty chair at the war council, but bodies stacking between the beached hulls and the tide-line.

Neptune — Poseidon to later readers — watches from Samothrace. Jove has turned his face away from Troy, satisfied that Hector has reached the ships and that the promise to **Thetis** is holding. But the sea-god has not sworn any such oath. He comes up from the depths in golden chariot, unyokes his brazen horses in a cavern between Tenedos and Imbrus, and walks among the Achaeans **invisibly** — first in the likeness of **Calchas**, then of other captains — stiffening arms, shaming the frightened, touching the two **Ajaxes** with his sceptre so that divine strength enters their limbs.

The poem cuts between dozens of small fights, and the scale is deliberately overwhelming. **Idomeneus** of Crete has his day — he kills

Othryoneus, **Asius**, **Alcathous**, matching blow for blow until **Deiphobus** and **Aeneas** force him back. **Meriones** loses a spear and goes to fetch another; the two men talk like soldiers in a lull, then return together to the slaughter. **Teucer** brings down **Imbrius**; the two Ajaxes bear the body off like lions carrying a kill through brushwood. **Menelaus** wounds **Helenus** and kills **Pisander**. Everywhere bronze rings on bronze, and the Locrian slingers and archers — men without the heavy panoply of the champions — sting the Trojan advance from behind cover while the armoured heroes bear the weight of **Hector**'s press.

And **Hector** — Hector is a wall of fire. The Greeks cannot drive him from the ships. **Polydamas**, the clear-eyed counsellor born on Hector's own night, urges retreat and a council of war: the fight has hemmed them in like a circle of flame, and the Ajaxes are not to be broken. Hector listens — partly — rallies the ranks, upbraids **Paris**, returns to the front. A boulder from **Ajax son of Telamon** strikes him above the shield-rim; he spins like a top, falls, is carried insensible to the Xanthus ford to vomit blood and recover. For a moment the Argives surge. Neptune has **turned the fortune of war**.

But this is not a Greek victory. It is a **breathing space** in a losing fight. **Patroclus** is in the tent of the wounded **Eurypylus**, dressing his hurt and talking quietly while the clamour of battle swells — the seed of everything that follows, though neither man knows it yet. The ships still stand with the sea at their backs. The best fighter in the army sits in his hut. And the gods walk the plain unseen, tipping scales no mortal plan can hold.

You are not meant to master every kill in this book. You are meant to feel what it means when the wall is behind you, the surf at your heels, and the man whose name the poem bears refuses to stand up. Neptune's secret help does not win the war. It only proves that even the gods' favour is piecemeal — one tide, one afternoon, one boulder striking Hector down before he rises again.

Plainly

War is not one duel but a thousand, and the gods walk among them invisible. Poseidon's secret help mirrors how luck, weather, and morale shift battles no plan can control — and how the absence of one irreplaceable man turns excellence into exhaustion.

The line

Butler's 1898 prose, on the two Ajaxes at the ships:

> *Ajax son of Oileus, never for a moment left the side of Ajax, son of Telamon, but as two swart oxen both strain their utmost at the plough which they are drawing in a fallow field, and the sweat steams upwards from about the roots of their horns—nothing but the yoke divides them as they break up the ground till they reach the end of the field—even so did the two Ajaxes stand shoulder to shoulder by one another.*
>
> — Samuel Butler, *The Iliad of Homer* (1898), Book XIII (Gutenberg #2199)

`plainly:` *The two Ajaxes — huge, stubborn, side by side — held the line at the ships like oxen yoked to the same plough.*

Book Fourteen — Hera Seduces Zeus

The scene

While the plain roars, **Nestor** cannot finish his meal. The old king leaves the wounded **Machaon**, climbs to the fighting, and finds **Agamemnon**, **Odysseus**, and **Diomedes** — all wounded — contemplating flight. Agamemnon would launch the ships and run; Odysseus rebukes him with a contempt that could strip paint. Diomedes urges them back into the fight even limping. The human command structure is cracking.

On **Olympus**, **Hera** watches **Jove** favour Troy and loathes it. She has a plan — audacious, comic, and wholly serious in its consequences. She bathes in ambrosia, plaited gold hair, Minerva's embroidered robe, golden clasps — then borrows from **Aphrodite** the **girdle wherein all her charms reside**: love, desire, and that sweet flattery which steals the judgement even of the most prudent. She buys **Sleep** with promises — a golden chair from Vulcan's forge, a bride among the Graces — and sends him to seal Jove's eyes while she goes to **Mount Ida**.

What follows is the poem's strangest interlude: the king of gods and men overcome by passion on a mountainside, the earth itself sprouting soft grass and dew-bespangled flowers beneath them, a golden cloud drawn over their embrace so that not even the sun may see. Sleep runs to **Neptune** with the news. The sea-god, no longer

bound by Jove's earlier prohibition, storms the field with a sword that makes men quake, swaps armour among the Greeks so the best gear reaches the bravest hands, and drives the Trojans back.

Ajax hurls another prodigious stone at **Hector** — the second great knockdown of the day — and the Trojans carry their champion off again, vomiting blood at the ford. The Greeks breathe. For a few hours, the tide turns.

Before Hera climbs Ida, the book gives you the Greek commanders at their lowest — wounded, arguing about retreat, saved only by shame and Odysseus's tongue. Nestor cannot eat; Machaon's wound still weeps; the wall smokes in the distance. That pairing matters. The immortals' bedroom farce and the mortal near-collapse at the ships are **the same movement**: the poem widening its lens so you see every layer of the catastrophe at once.

The *Iliad* is not embarrassed by any of this. The supreme god is outwitted by his wife with his own favourite pastime; the fate of armies hangs on seduction and sleep. Jove lists, in passing, every goddess and mortal he has ever desired — a comic roll-call that underlines how completely Hera has read him. Sleep, bribed and terrified, perches in a pine like a mountain bird until the deed is done. The gods are **persons** — jealous, amorous, scheming — and the poem never apologises for them.

The human stakes remain real because men die while immortals quarrel and make love on a ridge above the plain. When Jove wakes in Book Fifteen, he will thunder. For now, the Greeks live a little longer — and **Neptune**, who was forbidden to help them, walks the field with a sword that terrifies even the brave. The comedy buys hours of human life at the cost of hours yet to be taken. I read this book with a half-smile and full reverence at once — and I think the poem would want you to hold both.

Plainly

The *Iliad*'s world has layers — mortals fight while immortals quarrel and make love on a mountainside. The human stakes stay real because the poem never lets you forget men die while gods play.

The line

Butler's 1898 prose, when Aphrodite lends her girdle:

> *As she spoke she loosed from her bosom the curiously embroidered girdle into which all her charms had been wrought—love, desire, and that sweet flattery which steals the judgement even of the most prudent. She gave the girdle to Juno and said, "Take this girdle wherein all my charms reside and lay it in your bosom."*
>
> — Samuel Butler, *The Iliad of Homer* (1898), Book XIV (Gutenberg #2199)

`plainly:` *Hera wore Aphrodite's beauty like a weapon — love and desire woven into a belt — and even the gods could not blame her for what she did with it.*

Book Fifteen — Zeus Awakens

The scene

The reprieve does not last. On **Ida's** summit **Jove** opens his eyes, sees the Trojans routed and **Neptune** — whom he forbade to intervene — striding the field like a tempest. He turns on **Hera** with the thunderous memory of golden chains and hung gods. She submits, weeps, swears oaths by Styx: she did not send the sea-god; he came of his own pity. Jove accepts the lie because it suits him, sends **Iris** to recall Neptune and **Apollo** to heal **Hector**, and lays out the **rest of the war** in one terrible speech: Greece driven to the ships, **Patroclus** sent and killed, **Sarpedon** fallen, **Achilles** roused at last, **Hector** doomed.

On Olympus he tells Hera what must still happen — the listener feels the machinery of fate laid bare. **Mars** nearly brings heaven to civil war over a son killed on the plain and is stopped by **Minerva**. Iris drives Neptune from the field he does not wish to leave. Apollo reinspires Hector as a man waking from death. The god breaks the Greek wall as easily as a child kicks down a sand tower on the shore. The Trojans pour through. They reach the **ships** — not the outskirts of camp but the hulls themselves — and the battle becomes a fight on decks and in sterns, hand to hand with the long pikes kept for sea-fighting.

Ajax son of Telamon stands on a ship's deck like a man on a cliff

in a storm, spear stabbing down, shield ringing with javelins, sweat pouring, breath failing — left shoulder tired from holding the shield so long, yet still he does not yield. Jove has **deadened the courage of the Argives** and fills the Trojans like lions. Ajax tells his brother Teucer to fetch arrows; he kills **Melanippus**; he exhorts the Argives that Hector is not at a dance but at the ships to burn them. No one else can hold that position. The poem keeps its camera on him until the fire comes.

Then the fire comes. Hector chops the head from Ajax's ashen pike; the bronze point rings away; Ajax knows the hand of heaven and draws back. The Trojans **fling fire upon the ship**, and the stern is wrapped in flame.

Patroclus will go, and die; Sarpedon will fall; Achilles will return; Hector will perish; Troy will burn — but not yet. On the ground **Menelaus** sends **Antilochus** running on an errand that will matter in the next hour. Hector kills and kills; the wall is rubble; chariots reach the sterns.

From his hut **Achilles** sees the glare on the water — the crisis he swore to wait for. He smites his thighs and sends **Patroclus** to arm. The wager he made with Agamemnon — *let the Greeks break before my honour does* — has reached its edge. Ships burning. Ajax alone on the deck. The Myrmidons about to enter the story. The fleet is in flames and the greatest warrior still not fighting — but no longer unmoved. The next book will belong to the friend he sends in his place.

Plainly

The furnace — ships burning, Ajax on the deck like a man on a cliff in a storm. Achilles's wager was that the Greeks would break before his honour did. This is the book that asks whether he was wrong.

The line

Butler's 1898 prose, when the first ship catches fire:

> *And now, tell me, O Muses that hold your mansions on Olympus, how fire was thrown upon the ships of the Achaeans. Hector came close up and let drive with his great sword at the ashen spear of Ajax. He cut it clean in two … Ajax knew the hand of heaven in this, and was dismayed … Therefore he drew back, and the Trojans flung fire upon the ship which was at once wrapped in flame.*
>
> — Samuel Butler, *The Iliad of Homer* (1898), Book XV (Gutenberg #2199)

`plainly:` *Hector broke Ajax's spear, heaven turned the tide, and the Trojans torched a ship — the Greeks had nowhere left to retreat.*

Book Sixteen — Patroclus Falls

The scene

Patroclus comes weeping to **Achilles** — tears like a spring runnel, the kind of grief that is not soft. He does not beg for Agamemnon. He begs for **Greece**, for the wounded captains in their tents, for the ships that are burning while the best man in the army sits idle. He names Eurypylus, Diomedes, Agamemnon, Odysseus — all pierced, all groaning at the ships while Achilles's breast alone no lenitive can touch. *Let me go — in your armour, with the Myrmidons — not for the king, for us.* He even taunts: without Achilles, men unborn will curse the unforgiving heart that let Greece burn.

Achilles hears him. Something breaks in the quarrel — not reconciliation with Agamemnon, but a crack in the ice of **mēnis**. He will not fight himself; his honour is still engaged. But Patroclus may take the **Myrmidons**, wear the divine armour, drive the Trojans from the ships, and **come back**. Achilles lays down the limit with a friend's urgency that reads like love and like doom in the same breath. Butler gives the speech at length — *touch not Hector, Hector is my due*; *drive them from the fleet, then stop*; *some adverse god may destroy your rashness*; and the terrible wish that all Troy and all Greece might perish except the two of them alone. Patroclus, "blind to fate," begs for the arms anyway. Achilles yields. He offers a libation to Zeus; the god grants half the prayer — rescue for the ships, not safe return

for the friend.

While Patroclus leads the charge, Achilles stays by the ships and watches — still not fighting, still the author of what unfolds. When the fire on Protesilaus's hull is quenched, when Sarpedon falls and Zeus allows it, when the Trojans break, the poem keeps asking whether the substitute can stop where the original would not. He cannot. Success is the trap.

Patroclus arms while the battle rages. Achilles' greaves, cuirass, shield, helmet — he flashes like Achilles, and the Trojans **panic**, believing the wrathful hero has returned. Automedon yokes **Xanthus and Balius**, the immortal horses; the Myrmidons go in like wolves at a water-hole after blood. Patroclus quenches the fire on **Protesilaus**'s ship and drives the rout across the plain. He kills and kills — **Pyraechmes**, **Areïlycus**, a harvest of names — and the wall of Troy itself seems within reach. Even **Hector** runs until he understands it is not Achilles. Patroclus cuts battalions as a man scything thistles in a meadow; the tempo accelerates until you feel the success itself becoming dangerous — the very thing Achilles warned against.

Zeus weeps for **Sarpedon**, his son — then allows the Lycian prince to fall to Patroclus's spear. The scene is among the poem's most unsettling divine moments: the father who must let the child die. Even divine favour has a ledger. The scales of the war tilt: Patroclus beats back the Trojans three times from the wall, and on the fourth **Apollo** strikes him from behind — invisible in darkness — knocks the helmet from his head (the same helmet that protected Achilles, now destined for Hector's end), breaks his spear, loosens his corslet. **Euphorbus** spears him in the back and runs; **Hector** finishes him with a thrust through the belly when Patroclus, stunned and unarmed, can no longer stand his ground.

The death itself is quick; the meaning is not. Automedon and the immortal horses try to rescue the body and are driven back. The Trojans strip the armour while the man still breathes his last prophecy. Greeks and Trojans fight over Cebriones too — lions over a stag — as if the plain cannot contain one grief at a time.

He dies wearing **Achilles's armour**. Hector strips it and puts it on. Hector vaunts; Patroclus, with his last breath, names the gods who truly killed him and prophesies Hector's death at Achilles's hands. Achilles does not yet know. The book ends with Trojans cheering and Greeks carrying Patroclus away under a sky still full of spears.

Plainly

Love sends a man into battle, pride keeps him there too long, and the best friend dies wearing your face. Achilles's wrath destroyed Patroclus as surely as any spear. The limit he set was right; Patroclus broke it; the tragedy is overdetermined.

The line

Patroclus, dying — Butler's 1898 prose:

> *"Hector, vaunt as you will, for Jove the son of Saturn and Apollo have vouchsafed you victory; it is they who have vanquished me so easily, and they who have stripped the armour from my shoulders; had twenty such men as you attacked me, all of them would have fallen before my spear. Fate and the son of Leto have overpowered me, and among mortal men Euphorbus; you are yourself third only in the killing of me. I say further, and lay my saying to your heart, you too shall live but for a little season; death and the day of your doom are close upon you, and they will lay you low by the hand of Achilles son of Aeacus."*
>
> — Samuel Butler, *The Iliad of Homer* (1898), Book XVI (Gutenberg #2199)

`plainly:` *You didn't beat me, Hector — the gods did. They took my armour and gave you the kill — and Achilles will give you yours.*

Book Seventeen — Fight for the Body

The scene

Menelaus bestrides **Patroclus** as a cow over her first calf — shield forward, spear ready, willing to kill anyone who comes for the body. **Euphorbus**, who struck the first blow, tries to claim glory; Menelaus cuts him down and strips his armour. **Apollo** sends **Hector** in, and the Spartan gives ground — not from cowardice but because heaven is with the Trojan. He finds **Ajax** and brings him to the corpse.

Now the battle narrows to one thing: **the dead**.

Hector wants the body for Troy — head on the wall, armour as trophy, dogs denied their feast. He has already taken Achilles's panoply; now he wants the man who wore it. **Ajax** covers Patroclus with his broad shield and stands over him **as a lion stands over his whelps** when hunters have come upon him in the forest — brows knit, fury in the set of his shoulders. **Menelaus** beside him, nursing sorrow. The image is not sentimental; it is territorial and violent, the way grief often looks on a battlefield. **Glaucus** rebukes Hector for vaunting while leaving **Sarpedon's** corpse to the Greeks and failing to stand over this kill. Shamed, Hector dons **Achilles's armour** — Jove wagging his portentous brows, knowing what armour this is and what end it foretells — and offers half the spoils to any man who can drag Patroclus away.

The armies collide over the body like wolves over a carcass. Ajax orders the Greeks to hold together, give no ground, fight hand to hand — *thus did huge Ajax bid them, and the earth ran red with blood*. **Idomeneus** and **Meriones** fight their way in; **Aeneas** is roused by Apollo in disguise. Hector in Achilles's armour looks, for a moment, like the son of Peleus himself — a cruel mirage for the Greeks who have lost the real man to his tent and now lost his friend to the plain.

Homer darkens the sky over this one patch of ground so that sun and moon seem hidden while the rest of the field fights in daylight — as if the cosmos itself marks the death. **Thrasymedes** and **Antilochus** do not yet know Patroclus has fallen; Nestor's orders keep them in reserve until disaster is certain. The fight lasts **all day**, sweat raining on hands and eyes, spears falling thick as when a man stretches an ox-hide for tanning and workers on every side pour grease — a simile of exhausting, repetitive labour that makes the honour clear: this is work, not glamour.

Hippothous tries to drag the corpse by a strap through the press; Ajax smashes his helmet and brains him. Hector and Ajax trade blows over the dead. At one point Ajax cries that he cares less for the body becoming vulture-meat than for his own head — yet he stays. That is the book's moral weight: men say they fight for the living and prove it over the dead.

Menelaus would have carried off Euphorbus's armour if Apollo had not sent Hector in the likeness of a Trojan captain. The Spartan's inner debate — fight Hector alone with heaven against him, or yield and live — is one of the book's quiet truths: honour is not the absence of fear but the naming of it and the choice that follows.

When the body is dragged clear at last, the Achaeans do not celebrate. They carry Patroclus as men carry something that still belongs to someone waiting in a hut — someone who has not yet screamed. **Antilochus** runs; the two Ajaxes hold the rear; the sun sets. This is the long day between death and grief's full arrival — and the poem makes you live every hour of it.

Plainly

The dead are contested ground — honour requires recovering the body, and men die retrieving what cannot feel anything. Grief's first act is often a fight over what remains.

The line

Butler's 1898 prose, when Ajax stands over the fallen:

> *Ajax, therefore, covered the body of Patroclus with his broad shield and bestrode him; as a lion stands over his whelps if hunters have come upon him in a forest when he is with his little ones—in the pride and fierceness of his strength he draws his knit brows down till they cover his eyes—even so did Ajax bestride the body of Patroclus, and by his side stood Menelaus son of Atreus, nursing great sorrow in his heart.*
>
> — Samuel Butler, *The Iliad of Homer* (1898), Book XVII (Gutenberg #2199)

`plainly:` *A lion over its cubs — that was Ajax over Patroclus, with Menelaus beside him in grief.*

Book Eighteen — The Shield of Achilles

The scene

Antilochus brings the news. Achilles **screams** — a sound so terrible **Thetis** hears him under the sea and gathers the **Nereids** in lament: Glauce, Thalia, Cymodoce, and the long roll of sea-names Homer loves. He pours dust over his head, disfiguring his face, flings himself full-length on the earth, tears his hair. The captive women wail. He would cut his throat if Antilochus does not hold his hands. Butler's prose is plain here and therefore unbearable — no ornament, only a man learning his friend is dead and the armour is gone.

His mother rises from the deep. She already knows what he will ask. He has no armour — **Hector** wears it. She will go to **Vulcan** on Olympus and bring new panoply before dawn. But she speaks the truth he cannot bear: *your end follows soon after his.* Achilles answers that he would die now if he could have saved Patroclus — that he stays by the ships a bootless burden, unrivalled in fight yet useless in council — and will kill Hector anyway. He names anger sweeter than honey, smoke that rises in the soul; he names Agamemnon; he sets it aside because it is over. **Wrath** has turned: no longer cold withdrawal, but **murderous grief**.

Meanwhile the fight for the body continues. **Iris** bids Achilles show himself at the trench without armour — only Athena's golden halo and a shout like fifty thousand men — so Troy may fear him and

the Greeks breathe. He roars; the Trojans shrink; Hector thrice tries to drag Patroclus and thrice the two Ajaxes beat him back, though they cannot scare him off as shepherds cannot scare lions from a carcase. Night falls; Patroclus is carried in. Achilles will not bury him until Hector's head lies on the bier — twelve Trojan captives will die beside the pyre. He groans like a bearded lion robbed of its young in the forest, searching dingles for the hunter — and names the promise he made to Patroclus's father in Opoeis, now broken by Zeus. **Polydamas** urges the Trojans to retreat behind walls; **Hector** refuses and camps on the plain — a fatal pride Minerva has stolen from their wits.

And Homer pauses the war for **the shield**.

Thetis finds Vulcan at his bellows — lame, sweating, fashioning self-moving tripods on golden wheels — and asks armour for a son who will die soon. The smith answers with love for the goddess who saved him when his mother cast him out. He works through the night. First the **shield** — five folds of bronze, a gleaming circuit in three layers, silver baldric, and on the face of it **the whole world in metal**:

The heavens — earth, sea, sun, moon, Pleiades, Hyads, Orion, the Bear that never dips into Oceanus.

Two cities — one at peace: weddings with torchlight and flute-music, brides escorted from their chambers, Hymen loud in the streets; a quarrel in assembly over blood-money for a man killed, one claiming full payment made, another denying it, the people taking sides while heralds hold them back and elders on stone seats give judgement for two talents of gold to the fairest judge. One at war: two armies camped in gleaming armour, divided over sack or settlement; the city refusing, sallying with Mars and Minerva at their head; ambush in a river meadow where flocks come to water, shepherds slain, alarm raised, battle by the banks with bronze spears and Strife and Fate dragging the wounded and the dead.

The land — a fallow field thrice ploughed, dark furrows behind the oxen, cups of wine at the headland; a harvest with reapers, binders,

boys gathering sheaves, a feast under an oak after a great ox is sacrificed while the owner stands glad and silent among his labourers.

The vineyard — golden vines on silver poles, dark ditch, tin fence, youths and maidens carrying fruit in baskets while a boy sings the Linos-song on his lyre.

The cattle — cows of gold and tin lowing toward the river; four golden shepherds; two lions tearing a bull while dogs bark and dare not close.

The pasture — sheep, homestead, sheltered folds.

The dance — a green like Daedalus made for Ariadne: youths and maidens woven in rings and lines, hands on one another's wrists, sometimes in a ring like a potter testing his wheel, sometimes in long files; a bard, tumblers, crowds rejoicing. Homer does not explain the scenes; he **shows** them the way a craftsman shows his work — each ring of the shield a world complete in miniature.

The rim — the mighty stream of **Oceanus** encircling all.

The shock is **contrast**: the battlefield narrows to one corpse and one man's scream, then widens again to weddings, lawsuits, harvest, and stars. Achilles's war is suddenly placed inside ordinary life — the life he will never live — before he puts the armour on and closes the circle in blood.

Breastplate brighter than fire, helmet with golden plume, greaves of tin — Thetis bears them at dawn like a falcon from Olympus. The Myrmidons dare not look full at the armour; Achilles handles it with a fury that gleams. He fears flies on Patroclus's wounds; his mother promises the body will keep nine years if need be — a small mercy in a book otherwise without one.

He will kill for Patroclus. The shield says what he is killing *for* and *against*: not only glory, but ploughing, law, marriage, harvest, dance — life itself, hammered into bronze by a god who was once thrown from heaven and saved by pity. When he goes out again, he carries the world on his arm — and leaves the world on the shield for us to

study while the killing resumes.

Plainly

Grief becoming purpose — and art holding the world in one object. The shield is famous because Homer pauses the war to describe **life itself**: not glory alone, but ploughing, dancing, law courts, stars. Achilles will kill for Patroclus; the shield says what he is killing *for* and *against*.

The line

Butler's 1898 prose, when Vulcan forges the shield:

> *First he shaped the shield so great and strong, adorning it all over and binding it round with a gleaming circuit in three layers … He made the shield in five thicknesses, and with many a wonder did his cunning hand enrich it. He wrought the earth, the heavens, and the sea; the moon also at her full and the untiring sun, with all the signs that glorify the face of heaven … All round the outermost rim of the shield he set the mighty stream of the river Oceanus.*
>
> — Samuel Butler, *The Iliad of Homer* (1898), Book XVIII (Gutenberg #2199)

`plainly:` *Five layers of bronze — sky, stars, two cities, ploughland, harvest, vineyard, cattle, dancers — and Oceanus running round the rim: the whole world on a shield.*

Book Nineteen — Achilles Returns

The scene

Dawn comes in saffron over the sea, and **Thetis** brings the armour from **Hephaestus** — bronze that rings when she sets it down, so terrible that the Myrmidons dare not look at it full on. Achilles finds his mother's gift beside the body of **Patroclus**, and his grief turns to a fiercer light in his eyes. He fears the flies will breed in his friend's wounds; Thetis promises the body will keep, untouched, for a year if need be. *Unsay your anger against Agamemnon,* she says. *Arm at once.*

Achilles calls the army to assembly — even the men who stayed at the ships, the pilots and stewards, come running, for he has held aloof so long that his return feels like an earthquake. **Odysseus** and **Diomedes** limp in, still wounded. **Agamemnon** comes last, wounded too. The high king does not walk into the middle; he stands and speaks from his place, blaming **Folly** — eldest of Jove's daughters — for the day he stripped Briseis from Achilles. He offers the gifts he promised: tripods, cauldrons, horses, gold, and the women skilled in useful arts, **Briseis** among them. He swears on a sacrificed boar that he never went up into her bed.

Achilles barely hears the king. *Let us set battle in array,* he says. *It is not well to tarry talking about trifles.*

Odysseus, older and wiser in counsel, urges the army to eat first — no man can fight from dawn to dusk on an empty belly. Achilles refuses. Would they feast while the bodies of those Hector slew still lie mangled on the plain? Patroclus lies in his tent with his feet to the door, and all Achilles can think of is slaughter and blood and the rattle in the throat of the dying. He will fast until the sun goes down.

The gifts are brought anyway. **Briseis**, fair as Venus, sees Patroclus's body and flings herself upon it — tearing her breast, her neck, her face — and weeps that she left him living and has returned to find him dead. She remembers how he promised that Achilles would marry her and take her home to Phthia. The women join her lament; each weeps, Homer says, for her own sorrows as much as for the dead.

The elders pray Achilles to eat. He will not. **Zeus** looks down with pity and sends **Athena** to drop nectar and ambrosia into Achilles's breast so that hunger cannot break his limbs before battle. Then the arming begins — thick as snowflakes shed from Jove's hand, helmets and bossed shields and ashen spears stream from the ships until the whole land gleams. Achilles puts on the divine armour: greaves, breastplate, sword, the great shield that shines like the moon, the helmet with golden plumes that wave like a star. He tests himself in it; it seems to buoy him up as though it had been wings.

He mounts his chariot. His immortal horses **Xanthus** and **Balius** speak — white-armed Juno has given them human speech for this one hour. They promise to bring their driver back safely after the fighting, but warn him: the day of his death is near, and heaven and stern fate will destroy him. Achilles answers in great sadness: he knows. None the less he will not stay his hand till he has given the Trojans their fill of fighting. With a loud cry he drives to the front, radiant as the sun-god Hyperion, and the two armies face each other across the plain.

Plainly

Grief cannot wait for ceremony. Reconciliation with Agamemnon happens — gifts, oaths, Briseis returned — but none of it touches the engine. Achilles fasts because food would insult the dead; the gods feed him in secret because even wrath must have strength to spend. He knows he will die at Troy. He arms anyway.

The line

Briseis over Patroclus — Butler's 1898 prose:

> *Patroclus, dearest friend, when I went hence I left you living; I return, O prince, to find you dead; thus do fresh sorrows multiply upon me one after the other.*
>
> — Samuel Butler, *The Iliad of Homer* (1898), Book XIX

And the horses that will not lie:

> *Dread Achilles, we will indeed save you now, but the day of your death is near, and the blame will not be ours, for it will be heaven and stern fate that will destroy you.*
>
> — Butler (1898), Book XIX

`plainly:` *You were alive when I left; I come back to find you dead — and the sorrows keep multiplying. Your horses tell you straight: we'll get you through today, but Troy will kill you.*

Book Twenty — The Gods Descend

The scene

The armies arm on both sides of the plain. On **Olympus**, **Zeus** calls the gods to council — every river-god except Oceanus, every nymph of grove and spring — and tells them what he has decided: the ban is lifted. He will sit on his mountain and watch in peace, but they may go down among Trojans and Achaeans and **help either side as they are severally disposed**. If Achilles fights without hindrance, he will storm the city. Fate itself may not hold him.

The gods take their sides. With the Greeks: **Juno**, **Athena**, **Poseidon**, **Hermes**, **Hephaestus** — limping, but his thin legs plying lustily. With the Trojans: **Mars**, **Apollo**, **Diana**, **Leto**, **Venus**, and the river **Scamander** — Xanthus to the gods, Scamander to men. So long as the immortals held aloof, the Achaeans had been triumphant; now **Strife** rises among them, and the scale of the war changes.

Neptune and the gods who favour Greece do not plunge into the melee at once. They seat themselves on the high earth-barrow of **Hercules** and on the hill **Callicolone**, wrapped in darkness, and watch — ready to intervene if Mars or Apollo keep Achilles from his purpose. Below, the whole plain blazes with bronze.

Achilles searches for **Hector**. Apollo sends **Aeneas** against him instead, lending the Trojan courage and the voice of Lycaon. The

two champions meet with spears and lineage — Aeneas recites the generations of Dardanus back to Jove; Achilles reminds him how he once sacked his cattle and drove him helter-skelter down the slopes of Ida. They trade blows; Aeneas's spear goes through two layers of the divine shield but not the gold within. Achilles would have killed him with his sword, but **Poseidon** snatches Aeneas away in a mist — Jove loves the line of Dardanus, and Aeneas is fated to survive. Achilles, baffled, turns his fury on the mass of Trojans and begins to reap.

Hector would meet him. Apollo warns him off: do not challenge Achilles alone. Thrice Achilles springs at Hector; thrice Apollo snatches him into darkness. Each time Achilles rages at the trick and kills someone else instead — Iphition, Demoleon, Hippodamas, **Polydorus**, Priam's youngest and best-loved son, pierced through the back as he shows off his fleetness. When Hector sees his brother fall with his entrails in his hands, a mist comes over his eyes and he hurls his spear at Achilles; Athena turns it aside. Apollo catches Hector up again before Achilles can close.

The killing continues. Achilles rages like fire through a mountain glen, like oxen treading barley on a threshing-floor — the axle of his chariot bespattered with blood, his hands bedabbled with gore. The gods on their hills watch and quarrel. Heaven and earth must witness what happens next.

Plainly

Wrath at divine scale. Achilles is no longer a man nursing an insult; he is a force, and the poem matches him with gods fighting on the plain and quarrelling on the hills above. Men become pieces on a board the immortals shake — yet the pieces bleed.

The line

Zeus to the assembled gods — Butler's 1898 prose:

> *Do you others go about among Trojans and Achaeans, and help either side as you may be severally disposed.*
>
> — Samuel Butler, *The Iliad of Homer* (1898), Book XX

And the scale of what follows:

> *Such was the uproar as the gods came together in battle.*
>
> — Butler (1898), Book XX

`plainly:` *Every god may pick a side and come down to fight. When they do, the uproar shakes the earth — and Achilles keeps killing.*

Book Twenty-One — Achilles and the River

The scene

At the ford of **Xanthus** — the full-flowing river begotten of Jove — Achilles splits the Trojan rout in two. Half he drives toward the city along the path of yesterday's Greek panic; **Juno** sends a thick mist to slow them. The other half he pins against the silver-eddying stream until men and horses tumble in with a great uproar, like locusts driven into water before a grass fire. Achilles leaves his spear on the bank, leans it against a tamarisk bush, and wades in with his sword alone.

The river runs red. He hews Trojans on every side until his arms grow weary, then draws twelve young men alive from the water — hands bound with the girdles of their own shirts — to sacrifice later at Patroclus's pyre. He finds **Lycaon**, another son of Priam, whom he once captured in a vineyard and sold to Lemnos, and who has been home only twelve days. Lycaon catches his knees and begs mercy: he is not of the same womb as Hector. Achilles answers that there will be no more quarter. He drives his blade through Lycaon's collar-bone and flings the body into the current for the fishes to feed on.

The river-god has had enough. **Scamander** rises from the deep in human form and begs Achilles to do his grim work on land — the fair waters are choked with corpses; he can find no channel to the

sea. Achilles refuses. He will not cease until he has pent the Trojans in their city and tried **Hector** face to face. The river answers with a high wave and attacks him. Achilles catches at a great elm; the tree comes up by the roots and dams the stream. He flees over the plain, afraid — Achilles, afraid — while the god pursues like a dark-crested torrent eating the ground from under his feet.

He calls to **Jove**: is there none of the gods who will pity him? He would rather fall by Hector's hand than drown like a swineherd's boy in a storm. **Poseidon** and **Athena** appear in the likeness of men, reassure him — it is not his fate to perish in this river — and urge him on. Scamander calls to his brother **Simois** for help; the banks roar with flood and snags and stones. **Juno** sends **Hephaestus** with fire. The god of the forge burns the plain dry, then turns his flames on the river itself — elms, willows, tamarisks, the lotus and the reeds, the eels and fishes darting in the water. Scamander boils like a cauldron over a fire. He yields. Juno stays the quarrel.

Above, the other gods fall on one another — Mars strikes Athena; she fells him with a boundary stone and laughs; Venus leads Mars away groaning; Athena chases Venus and boxes her ears; Diana and Juno brawl; Apollo will not fight his uncle Neptune. Jove on Olympus hears the clamour and laughs. Below, **Achilles** drives the Trojans toward the walls. **Priam** orders the gates opened to let the fugitives in, then commands them shut before Achilles can bound through. **Apollo** keeps the champion out — once with mist, once by sending **Agenor** as a decoy and leading Achilles on a useless chase across the corn lands while the routed host pours into the city.

The poem's violence has reached its extreme: a man killing until a river protests, until fire fights water, until nature itself recoils. Then it turns, inevitably, toward the single duel that will end it.

Plainly

Wrath without limit — and the world's answer to it. Achilles slaughters until the river god stands against him in person; even he flees. There is always a larger force than your anger — and the poem is about to narrow everything down to one man waiting outside the gate.

The line

Scamander to Achilles — Butler's 1898 prose:

> *Achilles, if you excel all in strength, so do you also in wickedness, for the gods are ever with you to protect you: if, then, the son of Saturn has vouchsafed it to you to destroy all the Trojans, at any rate drive them out of my stream, and do your grim work on land.*
>
> — Samuel Butler, *The Iliad of Homer* (1898), Book XXI

And Achilles, unyielding:

> *So be it, Scamander, Jove-descended; but I will never cease dealing out death among the Trojans, till I have pent them up in their city, and made trial of Hector face to face.*
>
> — Butler (1898), Book XXI

`plainly:` *The river begs him: you're winning — take your killing onto dry land. Achilles says: I'll stop when Hector stands in front of me. Nothing else counts.*

Book Twenty-Two — The Death of Hector

The scene

The Trojans are inside the walls at last — scared as fawns, drinking at the battlements, wiping sweat from their faces while the Achaeans press close with shields on their shoulders. But **stern fate** keeps **Hector** where he is, before Ilius and the **Scaean gates**. Apollo has decoyed Achilles away from the rout; the god now tells the son of Peleus plainly: you are mortal, I am immortal — you cannot kill me. Achilles rages and turns back toward the city, radiant as the star men call Orion's Hound, blazing more brilliantly in harvest season than any other — brightest of them all, and boding ill for mortals.

Priam sees him coming and beats his head with his hands. He reaches his arms toward his son and begs him to come inside — not to face that man alone, not to give the son of Peleus a triumph. He paints the old man's death in detail: daughters haled away, children dashed to earth, hounds he reared himself tearing his flesh at his own gates. **Hecuba** bares her breast and weeps: remember this breast, dear son; come within the wall. If the wretch kills you, dogs will devour you at the ships — we shall not lay you out on a bed and mourn.

They cannot move him. Hector knows what he has done. **Polydamas** urged him to retreat when Achilles returned; he would not listen. Now he cannot face the Trojans he led to die. He considers laying down

his shield and offering Helen and all the treasure of Troy; he knows Achilles will show no mercy. He leans his shield against a tower and waits, undaunted as a serpent in its den.

Achilles comes on like **Mars** himself. Hector's heart fails him at the sight; he flees. What follows is the most famous footrace in literature — three times around the walls of Troy, past the wild fig-tree, past the two fair springs of Scamander where Trojan women once washed their clothes in time of peace. The prize is not a tripod or a bullock's hide. They run for Hector's life. All the gods watch. Zeus weighs golden scales: the doom of Hector sinks toward **Hades**. Apollo, who has sustained the runner's strength, leaves him.

Athena comes to Achilles and says: stay; I will bring him to stand. She takes the form of **Deïphobus** and tells Hector they will face the killer together. Hector turns at last. He offers a covenant: whoever wins will respect the other's body. Achilles glares and answers that there can be no covenants between lions and men — between wolves and lambs. He hurls his spear; Hector dodges; Athena returns it to Achilles unseen. Hector's spear strikes the centre of the divine shield and rebounds. He calls for a second spear from Deïphobus; no one is there. He understands: the gods have lured him on. *Let me not die ingloriously,* he says, and draws his sword.

Achilles finds the gap. Hector wears the armour stripped from **Patroclus** — all of it proof against bronze except the throat where the collar-bones divide the neck from the shoulders. The Pelian ash goes through. Hector falls. The windpipe is not severed; he can still speak. He begs that his body be ransomed — gold and bronze from his father, the body sent home for fire and lament. Achilles answers that dogs and vultures shall eat him; not if Priam weighed out gold twenty-fold on the spot. Hector with his dying breath says what he has always known: Achilles's heart is hard as iron; Paris and Apollo will slay him yet at the Scaean gates.

The shrouds of death enfold him. Achilles speaks to the corpse: *Die; I will accept my fate when Jove sends it.* He strips the blood-stained armour, and the Greeks run up to wound the body afresh — easier to

handle Hector now, they say, than when he was flinging fire on the ships. Then comes the act the poem will not let you forget. Achilles pierces the sinews at the backs of both feet, threads ox-hide thongs through, binds the body to his chariot, and drives. The head trails in the dust. The dark hair flies abroad. The comely head that was is laid low. Dust rises from Hector as he is dragged.

On the wall, Priam grovels in the mire. Hecuba tears her veil and screams. And inside the city, **Andromache** is at her loom, weaving a double purple web, telling her maids to heat water for Hector's bath — poor woman, she does not know he is beyond bathing. She hears the cry from the ramparts, the shuttle falls from her hands, and she runs like a maniac to the battlements. She sees the horses dragging what was her husband toward the ships. Her eyes are shrouded as with night; she falls backward. She foretells **Astyanax** — the boy who sat on his father's knees — growing up fatherless, working for cruel masters, pushed from the feast by boys whose fathers live. She will burn the fine raiment she wove; it is of no use now.

The chariot passes the very gates where Hector refused to shelter. Priam had foreseen his own end there — dogs at an old man's flesh — but it is the young man's body that trails in the dust instead. Hector dies bravely; Achilles wins shamefully. The city's champion reduced to a thing dragged behind an enemy's wheels — and Homer does not let you cheer.

Plainly

The kill that solves nothing. Hector dead, the city unbreached, Patroclus still unavenged in any way that heals — only paid in blood. Hector understood what the war cost; Achilles understood nothing but the spear-thrust. You do not get to separate glory from what glory costs.

The line

Hector, dying — Butler's 1898 prose:

> *I know you what you are, and was sure that I should not move you, for your heart is hard as iron; look to it that I bring not heaven's anger upon you on the day when Paris and Phoebus Apollo, valiant though you be, shall slay you at the Scaean gates.*
>
> — Samuel Butler, *The Iliad of Homer* (1898), Book XXII

And Achilles's answer to the plea for burial:

> *Dogs and vultures shall eat you utterly up.*
>
> — Butler (1898), Book XXII

`plainly:` *I couldn't move you — your heart is iron. Remember: you will die at Troy's gate too. And your body? The dogs get it.*

Book Twenty-Three — The Funeral Games

The scene

The Trojans wail through the city while the Achaeans reach the Hellespont. **Achilles** will not let the Myrmidons unyoke. Thrice they drive their chariots sorrowing round Patroclus's body; the sands and the men's armour are wet with weeping. Achilles lays his blood-stained hand on his friend's breast and promises what he promised before: Hector dragged to the pyre, dogs at the raw flesh, twelve Trojan sons slain in revenge. He lays Hector's corpse in the dust beside the bier — full length, face down — while the army feasts on oxen and sheep and goats, rivulets of blood running round the place where Patroclus lies.

Achilles refuses water on his own body until Patroclus is burned, his hair shorn, the barrow raised. That night, alone by the sounding sea, he sleeps at last — limbs weary from chasing Hector round windy Ilius — and **Patroclus's spirit** comes. Like him in stature, voice, and the light of his eyes. *You sleep and have forgotten me,* the ghost says. *Bury me, that I may pass the gates of Hades; the other shades drive me away. Nevermore shall we sit and take sweet counsel.* It asks that their bones lie in one urn — the two-handled golden vase Thetis gave — as they were brought up together in Peleus's house. Achilles reaches to embrace him; there is nothing; the spirit gibbers into the earth.

At dawn they fell oaks on Ida and build a pyre a hundred feet each way. Achilles cuts the yellow lock he grew for the river Spercheius — he will never see home — and gives it to the dead. He slaughters sheep and oxen, four horses, two of Patroclus's house-dogs, and **twelve noble sons of Trojans** before the flames. The pyre will not kindle until he prays the winds **Boreas** and **Zephyrus**; Iris fetches them; they roar on the fire all night while Achilles pours wine from a golden bowl and calls on Patroclus's name. At morning they gather the whitened bones into the golden urn, in two layers of fat, against the day Achilles too goes down to Hades.

Then the games — because grief needs ritual, and ritual needs community. Achilles sets prizes from the ships: cauldrons, tripods, horses, mules, oxen, women, iron. He will not race his own immortal horses; they stand weeping, manes trailing on the ground, having lost their brave driver. **Eumelus** falls when Apollo makes him drop his whip and Athena breaks his yoke. **Diomedes** wins the chariot race with divine help. **Antilochus** passes **Menelaus** by a trick at the narrowing of the track — cutting inside where the road has sunk — and the two men quarrel over honour until Achilles parts them and awards the prizes fairly, even giving a consolation prize to Eumelus for coming last.

There is boxing: **Epeus** knocks out **Euryalus**. Wrestling: **Ajax** and **Odysseus** grapple to a draw and share the gold. Running: **Odysseus** wins by a trick of the mind — Athena trips **Ajax** in the dung of the cattle the Greeks slew for supper when his foot would have crossed the line first. The archery contest goes to **Meriones**; the spear-throw to **Agamemnon** — no one will compete against the king. For twelve days the Greeks compete, laugh, quarrel over prizes, eat and drink in the shadow of the pyre — while **Hector's body** lies unburied, and each dawn Achilles drags it three times round Patroclus's tomb.

Apollo and Venus keep the corpse from corruption; the gods pity what Achilles does. The games are strange and wholly human — athletes bickering, fathers coaching sons round the turning-post, a

fallen charioteer bruised and weeping in the dust — and they sit on the same plain as the desecration. Homer holds both truths in one hand and gives the living their day before the poem turns to mercy.

Plainly

Grief needs ritual — and ritual needs community. The games honour Patroclus by making the living compete in his name; they also show Achilles's cruelty still unchecked, Hector dragged at dawn while men race chariots. Both truths sit on the same shore. The ghost asks for burial; Achilles reaches into air.

The line

Patroclus's ghost to Achilles — Butler's 1898 prose:

> *You sleep, Achilles, and have forgotten me; you loved me living, but now that I am dead you think for me no further. Bury me with all speed that I may pass the gates of Hades.*
>
> — Samuel Butler, *The Iliad of Homer* (1898), Book XXIII

And Achilles on his immortal horses, refusing to race:

> *I shall hold aloof, I and my steeds that have lost their brave and kind driver, who many a time has washed them in clear water and anointed their manes with oil.*
>
> — Butler (1898), Book XXIII

`plainly:` *You forgot me in sleep — bury me so I can rest. The games go on because the living must eat and compete and quarrel — but Achilles will not drive the horses Patroclus used to tend.*

Book Twenty-Four — Priam and Achilles

The scene

Twelve days pass. Each dawn **Achilles** yokes his horses, binds **Hector's** body behind the chariot, and drags it three times round **Patroclus's** tomb — then leaves it face down in the dust. He cannot eat, cannot sleep; he turns on his bed and weeps for the might and manfulness of his friend, for all they did together on the field and on the weary sea. **Apollo** keeps the corpse from corruption — golden aegis, ambrosial oil — and the gods on Olympus grow ashamed. Even those who favour Greece are sickened. **Apollo** speaks in council: Hector burned thigh-bones of heifers on their altars; will they not let his father ransom the body? Achilles has flung aside all pity, like a lion gorging on flocks.

Zeus sends **Thetis** to the ships: tell your son to accept ransom and release the body. He sends **Iris** to **Priam**: go alone at night with treasure, guided by no Trojan save a servant to drive the mule-waggon. **Hermes** will escort you. Achilles will not kill a suppliant.

Priam's house is drowning in filth and tears. He tells **Hecuba**; she begs him not to go — the savage at the ships will show no pity. Priam answers that a goddess has spoken to him face to face; if it is his fate to die at the ships, so be it — but first he will hold his son. He opens his fragrant cedar store-room and heaps out treasure: twelve vestments, cloaks, rugs, mantles, shirts, ten talents of gold, tripods,

cauldrons, a beautiful cup the Thracians gave him on an embassy. He drives the wailing Trojans from his court and rebukes his living sons — *worthless, would you had all been killed at the ships rather than Hector* — until they bring the waggon and yoke the mules.

Hecuba offers wine and bids him pray. **Jove** sends an eagle on the right hand — the dusky hunter, wings wide as a rich man's chamber door — and Priam drives out through the gates at dark. His sons and sons-in-law follow a little way, then turn back. On the plain, **Hermes** comes to him in the likeness of a young Myrmidon, comely and gentle, and walks beside him through the sleeping Greek camp. He lulls the sentinels into deep sleep, draws the bolt of Achilles's gate — a bolt it takes three men to move — and leaves Priam at the threshold. *Embrace his knees,* Hermes says. *Beseech him by his father.*

Achilles sits in his hut with **Automedon** and **Alcimus**; the table from his meal is still there. Priam enters unseen, clasps his knees, and **kisses the hands that killed his son** — the hands that have killed so many of his children. Achilles marvels as men marvel at a murderer who has fled to a great man's protection in a land of strangers. The Myrmidons stare.

Priam speaks. Think of your father, O Achilles like unto the gods — Peleus on the sad threshold of old age, no son to keep war from his door, yet glad to hear you live. I had fifty sons when the Achaeans came; nineteen from one womb; the greater part Mars has laid low. **Hector** was the guardian of the city and ourselves. I have steeled myself as no man has before me and raised to my lips the hand of him who slew my son. Fear the wrath of heaven. Pity me.

The heart of Achilles yearns. He takes the old man's hand and moves him gently away. They weep — Priam for Hector, Achilles for his father and for Patroclus — till the house is filled with lamentation. Then Achilles raises Priam by the hand, pitying the white hair and beard, and speaks of the two urns on the floor of Jove's palace: one of evil gifts, one of good; men meet now with fortune and now with sorrow. *You cannot raise him from the dead,* he says. *Mourn as you*

may, you will take nothing by it.

He will release the body. His mother came from Jove with the command; he knows a god brought Priam through the camp. He calls his servants to wash and anoint Hector, wraps him in a fair shirt and mantle — Priam is not to see the corpse till it is ready, lest grief enrage the killer and sin against heaven's word. Achilles lifts the body to the waggon himself and says to Patroclus: *Be not angry, if you hear even in Hades that I have given Hector to his father for a ransom.*

Then — and this is the strangest mercy in the poem — they eat. Achilles kills a white sheep; Automedon serves bread; they lay hands on the good things before them. Achilles tells the old king of **Niobe**, who ate though her twelve children lay dead, till the gods buried them on the tenth day. *Let us two now take food.* Priam marvels at Achilles's strength and beauty; Achilles marvels at Priam's noble presence. Beds are made in the forecourt; Achilles laughs softly and tells Priam to lie outside, lest some counsellor see him and tell Agamemnon. They agree on eleven days' truce for Hector's funeral rites. Achilles lays his hand on Priam's wrist in token that he should have no fear.

Sleep takes all but **Hermes**, who wakes Priam before dawn: you have paid a great ransom; do not let Agamemnon find you here. They drive through the camp and across the ford of Xanthus as saffron-robed Dawn breaks. **Cassandra** sees them from the wall and cries out; the city pours forth. Andromache and Hecuba meet the waggon first; they would weep till sundown, but Priam bids them make way — *when I have brought him home, you shall have your fill of mourning.*

Nine days they bring wood. On the tenth they lay Hector on the pyre. On the eleventh they gather his white bones in purple robes and a golden urn, heap a barrow, feast in Priam's house. **Helen** weeps that Hector never spoke an unkind word to her when others blamed her. Andromache mourns that **Astyanax** will grow up in a ruined world, pushed from other children's tables, without the father who was the only defence of Troy's gates.

Homer stops here — not with the horse, not with the fall of the city, not with Achilles dead at the Scaean gate. He stops at **burial**: wood on the pyre, ransom on the waggon, food shared between enemies, a father driving his son home through the breaking light. *Mēnis* — the wrath that opened the poem — has exhausted itself; what remains is the work of hands.

Plainly

The release, not the kill. The warrior who would not bend to Agamemnon bends to an old man who kissed the hands that killed his child. Honour, in the end, is not what you win in battle — it is whether the dead are laid out and the living permitted to weep.

The line

Priam to Achilles — Butler's 1898 prose:

> *Think of your father, O Achilles like unto the gods, who is such even as I am, on the sad threshold of old age. Fear, O Achilles, the wrath of heaven; think on your own father and have compassion upon me, who am the more pitiable, for I have steeled myself as no man yet has ever steeled himself before me, and have raised to my lips the hand of him who slew my son.*
>
> — Samuel Butler, *The Iliad of Homer* (1898), Book XXIV

And the poem's last line — Butler's 1898 prose:

> *Thus, then, did they celebrate the funeral of Hector tamer of horses.*
>
> — Butler (1898), Book XXIV (closing)

`plainly:` *Remember your own father — and pity me. I kissed the hand that killed my child. The poem ends not with victory but with Hector's funeral: the tamer of horses, burned and buried and named.*

The Note — the Iliad in a Hand

Twenty-four books is a great deal to carry. The *Iliad* knows it; that is why it ends not with triumph but with burial — a father and an enemy sharing food, a body burned, a name spoken while the city still stands. So before we close, let me do the thing this companion exists for — put the whole poem into a single hand. Not the catalogue of ships; not the fine distinctions of scholarship; just *what the poem is about*, said plainly enough to carry out the door.

Here is Homer's *Iliad*, as honestly as one grateful guest can hand it on.

It begins with wrath — not the war. The Muse is told to sing the anger of Achilles, and the countless pains it brought the Greeks. The poem is fifty-one days in the tenth year of a ten-year siege. Helen, the horse, the fall of Troy — most of that is elsewhere. This is the story of what happens when the best fighter stops fighting because his honour was touched.

Honour is not vanity — it is social oxygen. In Homer's world, public respect is how you know you are real. Agamemnon shames Achilles; Achilles withdraws; the army bleeds. Book One is a quarrel between proud men who cannot yield. Both are partly right. That is the trap.

The enemy is human. Hector is Troy's champion — husband, father,

the man who knows Troy will fall and fights anyway. Andromache on the wall with the baby is the poem showing you what the war destroys before it destroys it. When you reach Book Twenty-Two, you should grieve for both sides.

Pride has a bill. Achilles refuses the embassy in Book Nine — gifts cannot buy back an insult to the self. Patroclus dies wearing his armour because love and honour push a friend into the gap Achilles left. Wrath kills the person Achilles loved most. That is the poem's central engine.

Glory and death are paired. Achilles chose a short life and undying fame before the poem opens. Hector tells him, dying, that he will die at Troy too. The *Iliad* does not pretend you can have everything. It asks what you will trade.

Grief turns wrath into something worse — then into something else. After Patroclus, Achilles is no longer withholding; he is hunting. The river runs red. Hector is dragged behind a chariot. And then — Book Twenty-Four — an old king kisses his hands and Achilles weeps.

The gods are part of the weather. They favour, they quarrel, they seduce each other on mountains while men burn ships on the beach. You can read them as forces, as poetry, as the old religion Homer believed. The poem works either way because the mortals stay real underneath.

The shield says what the killing is for. In Book Eighteen, Hephaestus forges the world on bronze — cities at peace and at war, ploughing, dancing, the ocean rim. Achilles will kill under that image of life. The poem wants you to hold both at once.

The end is mercy, not victory. Troy still stands. Achilles will die. The war continues. Homer stops at Hector's funeral because that is the human finish line: the body returned, the rites performed, the name spoken while the women weep.

That is the *Iliad*, in a hand.

If you take only one thing: **wrath destroys what it claims to protect, and the poem's wisdom is not in the killing but in the weeping that follows.** Achilles begins unreachable and ends feeding an enemy king. Hector begins defending a doomed city and ends the man both sides mourn.

The first word of the Greek is *mēnis* — wrath. The last movement of the poem is a father kissing the hands that killed his son. Between those two words is everything Homer thought worth singing.

Now go read the old voice — or stand where the plain was, if you can, and imagine the watchfires.

Going — where to read next, and where to stand

A guest, leaving a fire, owes his hosts one last courtesy: he points the people he brought toward the door, so they can go in properly, by the real entrance, and meet the householders themselves. This is that.

I gave you the *Iliad* in an outsider's voice and an old public translation, because honesty asked me to use something I could name and you could check. But mine is the *visitor's* account. If anything in these pages moved you, the next step is to go past me — to the text itself, and to the scholars and poets who have lived inside it for three thousand years, and, if you can, to the mound in Turkey where people have looked for Troy ever since. Here is how.

Read the poem itself

The free, public-domain one (what this book quoted): Samuel Butler, *The Iliad of Homer* (1898). Plain prose, old, and free — Project Gutenberg #2199. Start here if you want to read the whole poem tonight for nothing.

Other free translations worth knowing:

Translation	Gutenberg	Notes
Alexander Pope (1715–1720)	#6130	Heroic couplets — gorgeous, very eighteenth-century
George Chapman (1611)	#5135	“The mighty line” — Keats’s sonnet was about this
A.T. Murray / Loeb (1924)	#2199	Closer to Greek structure
Lang, Leaf & Myers (1879)	#3059	Victorian prose, readable

Then go to the living poets. Butler and I are both outsiders who loved it. To hear the *music* Homer built in Greek, reach for a modern verse translation by a poet:

- **Richmond Lattimore** (1951) — the scholar-poet’s standard; close to the Greek line by line
- **Robert Fagles** (1990) — the one most people read in college; driving, readable verse
- **Emily Wilson** (2023) — the first woman to publish an English *Iliad*; clear, humane, brisk

Read this companion first; then pick one and hear what prose cannot carry.

The Greek (one line)

The poem’s first word: **µ□□□□** (*mēnin*) — wrath, anger, the kind that does not cool. The opening invocation:

□□□□□ □□□□□, □□□... — *Sing, goddess, the anger...*

You do not need Greek to love the *Iliad*, but knowing that the first word is *rage* tells you everything about Homer’s priorities. The Muse

is not told to sing the war, or Troy, or Helen. She is told to sing **wrath** — and the countless pains it brought.

A word on the scholars (so you go in with open hands)

You will quickly find that Classicists do not all read Homer the same way, and that this is not a problem to be solved but a field to be enjoyed. Was Troy a real city? Was “Homer” one poet or a tradition of singers? How much of the poem was composed orally, and when was it written down? Did the Trojan War reflect a memory of Bronze Age conflict? These have been argued, brilliantly, for centuries. This little book deliberately did not take sides, because that was never a guest’s place. When you go deeper, you will meet scholars who *do* take sides, with passion and learning. Listen to them as you would listen to a family talking about the thing they hold most dear.

Go and stand where the plain was

Hisarlik, in modern Turkey, is the mound most scholars identify as **Troy** — Bronze Age walls, a plain below where armies could have camped, the **Scamander** river (now the Karamenderes) running nearby. You can walk the excavated levels, stand on the walls, and look down at the flat ground where the Greeks’ ships would have pulled up and the Trojans would have watched from the ramparts.

Tourism is honest here: you will not “see the Trojan War.” You will see **why people have looked at this ground for three millennia** and imagined armies on it. Schliemann dug here; the debate continues; the wonder is real either way.

When you go: go gently, hire local guides, spend locally. The honest line, always: *here is what you can really stand in front of; the rest*

the story imagined.

What Homer does not give you

The **wooden horse**, the **sack of Troy**, Achilles's death at the **Scaean Gate** — these belong to the wider **Trojan cycle**. The *Iliad* ends at Hector's funeral. If you want the rest:

- **The Odyssey** — Odysseus's ten-year journey home (Homer's other great poem)
- **The Aeneid** — Virgil's Roman telling of Troy's fall and Rome's founding
- **The Trojan Women**, **The Oresteia** — Euripides and Aeschylus on the aftermath

Homer gives you wrath, withdrawal, return, and mercy. The burning city is someone else's fire.

A word on the house

This book sits on the **History Before Time · Companions** shelf beside *The Song of the Self* — the same Arjuna Badger house voice: reverent outsider, three registers kept separate, `plainly:` glosses owned as mine, source text quoted from public domain. Fearless about the craft; gentle with the maker.

If this companion did its job, you can now tell a friend what the *Iliad* is — and mean it.

The fire is still burning. It does not need us to tend it; it has been tended for three thousand years and will be tended long after. But they let us sit, and warm our hands, and carry a little of the light home.

Go in by the real door. And — if you can — stand on the plain at dusk, and imagine the watchfires.