

# ODYSSEY 5

Dawn reluctantly  
Left Tithonus in her rose-shadowed bed,  
Then shook the morning into flakes of fire.

Light flooded the halls of Olympus  
Where Zeus, high Lord of Thunder, 5  
Sat with the other gods, listening to Athena  
Reel off the tale of Odysseus' woes.  
It galled her that he was still in Calypso's cave:

"Zeus, my father—and all you blessed immortals—  
Kings might as well no longer be gentle and kind 10  
Or understand the correct order of things.  
They might as well be tyrannical butchers  
For all that any of Odysseus' people  
Remember him, a godly king as kind as a father.  
No, he's still languishing on that island, detained 15  
Against his will by that nymph Calypso,  
No way in the world for him to get back to his land.  
His ships are all lost, he has no crew left  
To row him across the sea's crawling back.  
And now the islanders are plotting to kill his son 20  
As he heads back home. He went for news of his father  
To sandy Pylos and white-bricked Sparta."

Storm Cloud Zeus had an answer for her:

"Quite a little speech you've let slip through your teeth,  
Daughter. But wasn't this exactly your plan 25

So that Odysseus would make them pay for it later?  
 You know how to get Telemachus  
 Back to Ithaca and out of harm's way  
 With his mother's suitors sailing in a step behind."

Zeus turned then to his son Hermes and said: 30

"Hermes, you've been our messenger before.  
 Go tell that ringleted nymph it is my will  
 To let that patient man Odysseus go home.  
 Not with an escort, mind you, human or divine,  
 But on a rickety raft—tribulation at sea— 35  
 Until on the twentieth day he comes to Schería  
 In the land of the Phaeacians, our distant relatives,  
 Who will treat Odysseus as if he were a god  
 And take him on a ship to his own native land  
 With gifts of bronze and clothing and gold, 40  
 More than he ever would have taken back from Troy  
 Had he come home safely with his share of the loot.  
 That's how he's destined to see his dear ones again  
 And return to his high-gabled Ithacan home."

Thus Zeus, and the quicksilver messenger 45  
 Laced on his feet the beautiful sandals,  
 Golden, immortal, that carry him over  
 Landscape and seascape on a puff of wind.  
 And he picked up the wand he uses to charm  
 Mortal eyes to sleep and make sleepers awake. 50

Holding this wand the tough quicksilver god  
 Took off, bounded onto Pieria  
 And dove through the ether down to the sea,

*Skimming the waves like a cormorant,  
 The bird that patrols the saltwater billows 55  
 Hunting for fish, seaspume on its plumage,*

Hermes flying low and planing the whitecaps.

When he finally arrived at the distant island

He stepped from the violet-tinctured sea  
On to dry land and proceeded to the cavern 60  
Where Calypso lived. She was at home.  
A fire blazed on the hearth, and the smell  
Of split cedar and arbor vitae burning  
Spread like incense across the whole island.  
She was seated inside, singing in a lovely voice 65  
As she wove at her loom with a golden shuttle.  
Around her cave the woodland was in bloom,  
Alder and poplar and fragrant cypress.  
Long-winged birds nested in the leaves,  
Horned owls and larks and slender-throated shorebirds 70  
That screech like crows over the bright saltwater.  
Tendrils of ivy curled around the cave's mouth,  
The glossy green vine clustered with berries.  
Four separate springs flowed with clear water, criss-  
Crossing channels as they meandered through meadows 75  
Lush with parsley and blossoming violets.  
It was enough to make even a visiting god  
Enraptured at the sight. Quicksilver Hermes  
Took it all in, then turned and entered  
The vast cave.

Calypso knew him at sight. 80  
The immortals have ways of recognizing each other,  
Even those whose homes are in outlying districts.  
But Hermes didn't find the great hero inside.  
Odysseus was sitting on the shore,  
As ever those days, honing his heart's sorrow, 85  
Staring out to sea with hollow, salt-rimmed eyes.

Calypso, sleek and haloed, questioned Hermes  
Politely, as she seated him on a lacquered chair:

"My dear Hermes, to what do I owe 90  
The honor of this unexpected visit? Tell me  
What you want, and I'll oblige you if I can."

The goddess spoke, and then set a table  
With ambrosia and mixed a bowl of rosy nectar.  
The quicksilver messenger ate and drank his fill,

Then settled back from dinner with heart content  
And made the speech she was waiting for:

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"You ask me, goddess to god, why I have come.  
Well, I'll tell you exactly why. Remember, you asked.  
Zeus ordered me to come here; I didn't want to.  
Who would want to cross this endless stretch  
Of deserted sea? Not a single city in sight  
Where you can get a decent sacrifice from men.  
But you know how it is: Zeus has the aegis,  
And none of us gods can oppose his will.  
He says you have here the most woebegone hero  
Of the whole lot who fought around Priam's city  
For nine years, sacked it in the tenth, and started home.  
But on the way back they offended Athena,  
And she swamped them with hurricane winds and waves.  
His entire crew was wiped out, and he  
Drifted along until he was washed up here.  
Anyway, Zeus wants you to send him back home. Now.  
The man's not fated to rot here far from his friends.  
It's his destiny to see his dear ones again  
And return to his high-gabled Ithacan home."

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He finished, and the nymph's aura stiffened.  
Words flew from her mouth like screaming hawks:

"You gods are the most jealous bastards in the universe—  
Persecuting any goddess who ever openly takes  
A mortal lover to her bed and sleeps with him.  
When Dawn caressed Orion with her rosy fingers,  
You celestial layabouts gave her nothing but trouble  
Until Artemis finally shot him on Ortygia—  
Gold-throned, holy, gentle-shafted assault goddess!  
When Demeter followed her heart and unbound  
Her hair for Iasion and made love to him  
In a late-summer field, Zeus was there taking notes  
And executed the man with a cobalt lightning blast.  
And now you gods are after me for having a man.  
Well, I was the one who saved his life, unprying him  
From the spar he came floating here on, sole survivor

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Of the wreck Zeus made of his streamlined ship,  
Slivering it with lightning on the wine-dark sea.  
I loved him, I took care of him, I even told him  
I'd make him immortal and ageless all of his days. 135  
But you said it, Hermes: Zeus has the aegis  
And none of us gods can oppose his will.  
So all right, he can go, if it's an order from above,  
Off on the sterile sea. How I don't know.  
I don't have any oared ships or crewmen 140  
To row him across the sea's broad back.  
But I'll help him. I'll do everything I can  
To get him back safely to his own native land."

The quicksilver messenger had one last thing to say:

"Well send him off now and watch out for Zeus' temper. 145  
Cross him and he'll really be rough on you later."

With that the tough quicksilver god made his exit.

Calypso composed herself and went to Odysseus,  
Zeus' message still ringing in her ears.  
She found him sitting where the breakers rolled in. 150  
His eyes were perpetually wet with tears now,  
His life draining away in homesickness.  
The nymph had long since ceased to please.  
He still slept with her at night in her cavern,  
An unwilling lover mated to her eager embrace. 155  
Days he spent sitting on the rocks by the breakers,  
Staring out to sea with hollow, salt-rimmed eyes.  
She stood close to him and started to speak:

"You poor man. You can stop grieving now  
And pining away. I'm sending you home. 160  
Look, here's a bronze axe. Cut some long timbers  
And make yourself a raft fitted with topdecks,  
Something that will get you across the sea's misty spaces.  
I'll stock it with fresh water, food and red wine—  
Hearty provisions that will stave off hunger—and 165  
I'll clothe you well and send you a following wind

To bring you home safely to your own native land,  
If such is the will of the gods of high heaven,  
Whose minds and powers are stronger than mine."

Odysseus' eyes shone with weariness. He stiffened, 170  
And shot back at her words fletched like arrows:

"I don't know what kind of send-off you have in mind,  
Goddess, telling me to cross all that open sea on a raft,  
Painful, hard sailing. Some well-rigged vessels  
Never make it across with a stiff wind from Zeus. 175  
You're not going to catch me setting foot on any raft  
Unless you agree to swear a solemn oath  
That you're not planning some new trouble for me."

Calypso's smile was like a shower of light.  
She touched him gently, and teased him a little: 180

"Blasphemous, that's what you are—but nobody's fool!  
How do you manage to say things like that?  
All right. I swear by Earth and Heaven above  
And the subterranean water of Styx—the greatest  
Oath and the most awesome a god can swear— 185  
That I'm not planning more trouble for you, Odysseus.  
I'll put my mind to work for you as hard as I would  
For myself, if ever I were in such a fix.  
My heart is in the right place, Odysseus,  
Nor is it a cold lump of iron in my breast." 190

With that the haloed goddess walked briskly away  
And the man followed in the deity's footsteps.  
The two forms, human and divine, came to the cave  
And he sat down in the chair which moments before  
Hermes had vacated, and the nymph set out for him 195  
Food and drink such as mortal men eat.  
She took a seat opposite godlike Odysseus  
And her maids served her ambrosia and nectar.  
They helped themselves to as much as they wanted,  
And when they had their fill of food and drink 200  
Calypso spoke, an immortal radiance upon her:

"Son of Laertes in the line of Zeus, my wily Odysseus,  
Do you really want to go home to your beloved country  
Right away? Now? Well, you still have my blessings.  
But if you had any idea of all the pain 205  
You're destined to suffer before getting home,  
You'd stay here with me, deathless—  
Think of it, Odysseus!—no matter how much  
You missed your wife and wanted to see her again.  
You spend all your daylight hours yearning for her. 210  
I don't mind saying she's not my equal  
In beauty, no matter how you measure it.  
Mortal beauty cannot compare with immortal."

Odysseus, always thinking, answered her this way:

"Goddess and mistress, don't be angry with me. 215  
I know very well that Penelope,  
For all her virtues, would pale beside you.  
She's only human, and you are a goddess,  
Eternally young. Still, I want to go back.  
My heart aches for the day I return to my home. 220  
If some god hits me hard as I sail the deep purple,  
I'll weather it like the sea-bitten veteran I am.  
God knows I've suffered and had my share of sorrows  
In war and at sea. I can take more if I have to."

The sun set on his words, and the shadows darkened. 225  
They went to a room deep in the cave, where they made  
Sweet love and lay side by side through the night.

Dawn came early, touching the sky with rose.

Odysseus put on a shirt and cloak,  
And the nymph slipped on a long silver robe 230  
Shimmering in the light, cinched it at the waist  
With a golden belt and put a veil on her head.  
What to do about sending Odysseus off?  
She handed him an axe, bronze, both edges honed.  
The olive-wood haft felt good in his palms. 235

She gave him a sharp adze, too, then led the way  
To the island's far side where the trees grew tall,  
Alder and poplar and silver fir, sky-topping trees  
Long-seasoned and dry that would keep him afloat.  
Calypso showed him where the trees grew tall 240  
Then went back home, a glimmer in the woods,  
While Odysseus cut timber.

Working fast,  
He felled twenty trees, cut them to length,  
Smoothed them skillfully and trued them to the line.  
The glimmer returned—Calypso with an auger— 245  
And he drilled the beams through, fit them up close  
And hammered them together with joiners and pegs.  
About the size of a deck a master shipwright  
Chisels into shape for a broad-bowed freighter  
Was the size Odysseus made his wide raft. 250  
He fit upright ribs close-set in the decking  
And finished them with long facing planks.  
He built a mast and fit in a yardarm,  
And he made a rudder to steer her by.  
Then he wove a wicker-work barrier 255  
To keep off the waves, plaiting it thick.  
Calypso brought him a large piece of cloth  
To make into a sail, and he fashioned that, too.  
He rigged up braces and halyards and lines,  
Then levered his craft down to the glittering sea. 260

Day four, and the job was finished.  
Day five, and Calypso saw him off her island,  
After she had bathed him and dressed him  
In fragrant clothes. She filled up a skin  
With wine that ran black, another large one 265  
With water, and tucked into a duffel  
A generous supply of hearty provisions.  
And she put a breeze at his back, gentle and warm.

Odysseus' heart sang as he spread sail to the wind,  
And he steered with the rudder, a master mariner 270  
Aboard his craft. Sleep never fell on his eyelids  
As he watched the Pleiades and slow-setting Boötes



And the Bear (also known as the Wagon)  
That pivots in place and chases Orion  
And alone is aloof from the wash of Ocean. 275  
Calypso, the glimmering goddess, had told him  
To sail with the stars of the Bear on his left.  
Seventeen days he sailed the deep water,  
And on the eighteenth day the shadowy mountains  
Of the Phaeacians' land loomed on the horizon, 280  
To his eyes like a shield on the misty sea.

And Poseidon saw him.

From the far Solymi Mountains  
The Lord of Earthquake, returning from Ethiopia,  
Saw him, an image in his mind bobbing on the sea.  
Angrier than ever, he shook his head 285  
And cursed to himself:

"Damn it all, the gods  
Must have changed their minds about Odysseus  
While I was away with the Ethiopians.  
He's close to Phaeacia, where he's destined to escape  
The great ring of sorrow that has closed around him. 290  
But I'll bet I can still blow some trouble his way."

He gathered the clouds, and gripping his trident  
He stirred the sea. And he raised all the blasts  
Of every wind in the world and covered with clouds  
Land and sea together. Night rose in the sky. 295  
The winds blew hard from every direction,  
And lightning-charged Boreas rolled in a big wave.  
Odysseus felt his knees and heart weaken.  
Hunched over, he spoke to his own great soul:

"Now I'm in for it. 300  
I'm afraid that Calypso was right on target  
When she said I would have my fill of sorrow  
On the open sea before I ever got home.  
It's all coming true. Look at these clouds  
Zeus is piling like flowers around the sky's rim, 305  
And he's roughened the sea, and every wind

In the world is howling around me.  
Three times, four times luckier than I  
Were the Greeks who died on Troy's wide plain!  
If only I had gone down on that day 310  
When the air was whistling with Trojan spears  
In the desperate fight for Achilles' dead body.  
I would have had burial then, honored by the army.  
As it is I am doomed to a wretched death at sea."

His words weren't out before a huge cresting wave 315  
Crashed on his raft and shivered its timbers.  
He was pitched clear of the deck. The rudder flew  
From his hands, the mast cracked in two  
Under the force of the hurricane winds,  
And the yardarm and sail hove into the sea. 320  
He was under a long time, unable to surface  
From the heaving swell of the monstrous wave,  
Weighed down by the clothes Calypso had given him.  
At last he came up, spitting out saltwater,  
Seabrine gurgling from his nostrils and mouth. 325  
For all his distress, though, he remembered his raft,  
Lunged through the waves, caught hold of it  
And huddled down in its center shrinking from death.

An enormous wave rode the raft into cross-currents.

*The North Wind in autumn sweeps through a field 330*  
*Rippling with thistles and swirls them around.*

So the winds swirled the raft all over the sea,  
South Wind colliding at times with the North,  
East Wind shearing away from the West.

And the White Goddess saw him, Cadmus' daughter 335  
Ino, once a human girl with slim, beautiful ankles  
Who had won divine honors in the saltwater gulfs.  
She pitied Odysseus his wandering, his pain,  
And rose from the water like a flashing gull,  
Perched on his raft, and said this to him: 340

"Poor man. Why are you so odious to Poseidon,  
Odysseus, that he sows all this grief for you?  
But he'll not destroy you, for all of his fury.  
Now do as I say—you're in no way to refuse:  
Take off those clothes and abandon your raft 345  
To the winds' will. Swim for your life  
To the Phaeacians' land, your destined safe harbor.  
Here, wrap this veil tightly around your chest.  
It's immortally charmed: Fear no harm or death.  
But when with your hands you touch solid land 350  
Untie it and throw it into the deep blue sea  
Clear of the shore so it can come back to me."

With these words the goddess gave him the veil  
And slipped back into the heavy seas  
Like a silver gull. The black water swallowed her. 355  
Godlike Odysseus brooded on his trials  
And spoke these words to his own great soul:

"Not this. Not another treacherous god  
Scheming against me, ordering me to abandon my raft.  
I will not obey. I've seen with my own eyes 360  
How far that land is where she says I'll be saved.  
I'll play it the way that seems best to me.  
As long as the timbers are still holding together  
I'll hang on and gut it out right here where I am.  
When and if a wave shatters my raft to pieces, 365  
Then I'll swim for it. What else can I do?"

As he churned these thoughts in the pit of his stomach  
Poseidon Earthshaker raised up a great wave—  
An arching, cavernous, sensational tsunami—  
And brought it crashing down on him. 370

*As storm winds blast into a pile of dry chaff  
And scatter the stuff all over the place,*

So the long beams of Odysseus' raft were scattered.  
He went with one beam and rode it like a stallion,  
Stripping off the clothes Calypso had given him 375

And wrapping the White Goddess' veil round his chest.  
Then he dove into the sea and started to swim  
A furious breaststroke. The Lord of Earthquake saw him  
And said to himself with a slow toss of his head:

"That's right. Thrash around in misery on the open sea 380  
Until you come to human society again.  
I hope that not even then will you escape from evil."

With these words he whipped his sleek-coated horses  
And headed for his fabulous palace on Aegae.

But Zeus' daughter Athena had other ideas. 385  
She barricaded all the winds but one  
And ordered them to rest and fall asleep.  
Boreas, though, she sent cracking through the waves,  
A tailwind for Odysseus until he was safe on Phaeacia,  
And had beaten off the dark birds of death. 390

Two nights and two days the solid, mitered waves  
Swept him on, annihilation all his heart could foresee.  
But when Dawn combed her hair in the third day's light,  
The wind died down and there fell  
A breathless calm. Riding a swell 395  
He peered out and saw land nearby.

*You know how precious a father's life is  
To children who have seen him through a long disease,  
Gripped by a malevolent spirit and melting away,  
But then released from suffering in a spasm of joy.* 400

The land and woods were that welcome a sight  
To Odysseus. He kicked hard for the shoreline,  
But when he was as close as a shout would carry  
He heard the thud of waves on the rocks,  
Thundering surf that pounded the headland 405  
And bellowed eerily. The sea churned with foam.  
There were no harbors for ships, no inlets or bays,  
Only jutting cliffs and rocks and barnacled crags.  
Odysseus' heart sank and his knees grew weak.

With a heavy sigh he spoke to his own great soul:

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"Ah, Zeus has let me see land I never hoped to see  
And I've cut my way to the end of this gulf,  
But there's no way to get out of the grey saltwater.  
Only sharp rocks ahead, laced by the breakers,  
And beyond them slick stone rising up sheer  
Right out of deep water, no place for a foothold,  
No way to stand up and wade out of trouble.  
If I try to get out here a wave might smash me  
Against the stone cliff. Some mooring that would be!  
If I swim around farther and try to find  
A shelving shore or an inlet from the sea,  
I'm afraid that a squall will take me back out  
Groaning deeply on the teeming-dark water,  
Or some monster will attack me out of the deep  
From the swarming brood of great Amphitrîtê.  
I know how odious I am to the Earthshaker."

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As these thoughts welled up from the pit of his stomach  
A breaker bore him onto the rugged coast.  
He would have been cut to ribbons and his bones crushed  
But grey-eyed Athena inspired him.  
Slammed onto a rock he grabbed it with both hands  
And held on groaning until the breaker rolled by.  
He had no sooner ducked it when the backwash hit him  
And towed him far out into open water again.

430

*It was just like an octopus pulled out of its hole  
With pebbles stuck to its tentacles,*

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Odysseus' strong hands clinging to the rocks  
Until the skin was ripped off. The wave  
Pulled him under, and he would have died  
Then and there. But Athena was with him.  
He surfaced again: the wave spat him up landwards,  
And he swam along parallel to the coast, scanning it  
For a shelving beach, an inlet from the sea,  
And when he swam into the current of a river delta  
He knew he had come to the perfect spot,

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Lined with smooth rocks and sheltered from the wind.  
He felt the flowing of the rivergod, and he prayed:

"Hear me, Riverlord, whoever you are  
And however men pray to you:  
I am a fugitive from the sea  
And Poseidon's persecution,  
A wandering mortal, pitiful  
To the gods, I come to you,  
To your water and your knees.  
I have suffered much, O Lord,  
Lord, hear my prayer."

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At these words the god stopped his current,  
Made his waters calm and harbored the man  
In his river's shallows. Odysseus crawled out  
On hands and knees. The sea had broken his spirit.  
His whole body was swollen, and saltwater trickled  
From his nose and mouth. Breath gone, voice gone,  
He lay scarcely alive, drained and exhausted.  
When he could breathe again and his spirit returned  
He unbound the goddess' veil from his body  
And threw it into the sea-melding river  
Where it rode the crest of a wave down the current  
And into Ino's own hands. He turned away from the river,  
Sank into a bed of rushes, and kissed the good earth.  
Huddled over he spoke to his own great soul:

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"What am I in for now? How will this end?  
If I keep watch all night here by the river  
I'm afraid a hard frost—or even a gentle dew—  
Will do me in, as weak as I am.  
The wind blows cold from a river toward dawn.  
But if I climb the bank to the dark woods up there  
And fall asleep in a thicket, even if I survive  
Fatigue and cold and get some sweet sleep,  
I'm afraid I'll fall prey to some prowling beast."

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He thought it over and decided it was better  
To go to the woods. They were near the water

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On an open rise. He found two olive trees there,  
One wild, one planted, their growth intertwined,  
Proof against blasts of the wild, wet wind,  
The sun unable to needle light through, 485  
Impervious to rain, so thickly they grew  
Into one tangle of shadows. Odysseus burrowed  
Under their branches and scraped out a bed.  
He found a mass of leaves there, enough to keep warm  
Two or three men on the worst winter day. 490  
The sight of these leaves was a joy to Odysseus,  
And the godlike survivor lay down in their midst  
And covered himself up.

*A solitary man  
Who lives on the edge of the wilderness  
And has no neighbors, will hide a charred log 495  
Deep in the black embers and so keep alive  
The fire's seed and not have to rekindle it  
From who knows where.*

So Odysseus buried  
Himself in the leaves. And Athena sprinkled  
His eyes with sleep for quickest release 500  
From pain and fatigue.

And she closed his eyelids.