

The Cattle of the Sun God

In the small hours of the third watch, when stars
that shone out in the first dusk of evening
830 had gone down to their setting, a giant wind
blew from heaven, and clouds driven by Zeus
shrouded land and sea in a night of storm;
so, just as Dawn with fingertips of rose
touched the windy world, we dragged our ship
835 to cover in a grotto, a sea cave
where nymphs had chairs of rock and sanded floors.
I mustered all the crew and said:

‘Old shipmates,
our stores are in the ship’s hold, food and drink;
the cattle here are not for our provision,
840 or we pay dearly for it.

D
mark the words in
that describe a

Why does Homer
refer to Scylla’s

What does this
suggest about
?

Fierce the god is
 who cherishes these heifers and these sheep:
 Helios; and no man avoids his eye.'

To this my fighters nodded. Yes. But now
 we had a month of onshore gales, blowing
 845 day in, day out—south winds, or south by east.
 As long as bread and good red wine remained
 to keep the men up, and appease their craving,
 they would not touch the cattle. But in the end,
 when all the barley in the ship was gone,
 850 hunger drove them to scour the wild shore
 with angling hooks, for fishes and sea fowl,
 whatever fell into their hands; and lean days
 wore their bellies thin.

The storms continued.
 So one day I withdrew to the interior
 855 to pray the gods in solitude, for hope
 that one might show me some way of salvation.
 Slipping away, I struck across the island
 to a sheltered spot, out of the driving gale.
 I washed my hands there, and made supplication
 860 to the gods who own Olympus,⁷⁰ all the gods—
 but they, for answer, only closed my eyes
 under slow drops of sleep.

70. **Olympus** (oh LIHM puhz) Mount
 Olympus, home of the gods.

Now on the shore Eurylochus
 made his insidious plea:

'Comrades,' he said,
 'You've gone through everything; listen to what I say.
 865 All deaths are hateful to us, mortal wretches,
 but famine is the most pitiful, the worst
 end that a man can come to.

Will you fight it?
 Come, we'll cut out the noblest of these cattle
 for sacrifice to the gods who own the sky;
 870 and once at home, in the old country of Ithaca,
 if ever that day comes—
 we'll build a costly temple and adorn it
 with every beauty for the Lord of Noon.⁷¹
 But if he flares up over his heifers lost,
 875 wishing our ship destroyed, and if the gods
 make cause with him, why, then I say: Better
 open your lungs to a big sea once for all
 than waste to skin and bones on a lonely island!

71. **Lord of Noon** Helios.

Thus Eurylochus; and they murmured 'Aye!'
880 trooping away at once to round up heifers.
Now, that day tranquil cattle with broad brows
were grazing near, and soon the men drew up
around their chosen beasts in ceremony.
They plucked the leaves that shone on a tall oak—
885 having no barley meal—to strew the victims,
performed the prayers and ritual, knifed the kine
and flayed each carcass, cutting thighbones free
to wrap in double folds of fat. These offerings,
with strips of meat, were laid upon the fire.
890 Then, as they had no wine, they made libation
with clear spring water, broiling the entrails first;
and when the bones were burnt and tripe shared,
they spitted the carved meat.

Just then my slumber
left me in a rush, my eyes opened,
895 and I went down the seaward path. No sooner
had I caught sight of our black hull, than savory
odors of burnt fat eddied around me;
grief took hold of me, and I cried aloud:

'O Father Zeus and gods in bliss forever,
900 you made me sleep away this day of mischief!
O cruel drowsing, in the evil hour!
Here they sat, and a great work they contrived.⁷²
Lampetia⁷³ in her long gown meanwhile
had borne swift word to the Overlord of Noon:
905 'They have killed your kine.'

And the Lord Helios
burst into angry speech amid the immortals:

'O Father Zeus and gods in bliss forever,
punish Odysseus' men! So overweening,
now they have killed my peaceful kine, my joy
910 at morning when I climbed the sky of stars,
and evening, when I bore westward from heaven.
Restitution or penalty they shall pay—
and pay in full—or I go down forever
to light the dead men in the underworld.'

915 Then Zeus who drives the stormcloud made reply:
'Peace, Helios: shine on among the gods,
shine over mortals in the fields of grain.
Let me throw down one white-hot bolt, and make
splinters of their ship in the winedark sea.'

NOTES

72. **contrived** v. thought up; devised.

73. **Lampetia** (lam PEE shuh) a nymph.

NOTES

74. **Hermes** (HUR meez) *n.* god who serves as herald and messenger of the other gods.

75. **beeves** (beevz) *n.* alternate plural form of "beef."

76. **petrels** (PEH truhlz) *n.* small, dark sea birds.

920 —Calypso later told me of this exchange,
as she declared that Hermes⁷⁴ had told her.
Well, when I reached the sea cave and the ship,
I faced each man, and had it out; but where
could any remedy be found? There was none.

925 The silken beeves⁷⁵ of Hellos were dead.
The gods, moreover, made queer signs appear:
cowhides began to crawl, and beef, both raw
and roasted, lowed like kine upon the spits.

Now six full days my gallant crew could feast
930 upon the prime beef they had marked for slaughter
from Hellos' herd; and Zeus, the son of Cronus,
added one fine morning.

All the gales

had ceased, blown out, and with an offshore breeze
we launched again, stepping the mast and sail,
935 to make for the open sea. Astern of us
the island coastline faded, and no land
showed anywhere, but only sea and heaven,
when Zeus Cronion piled a thunderhead
above the ship, while gloom spread on the ocean.
940 We held our course, but briefly. Then the squall
struck whining from the west, with gale force, breaking
both forestays, and the mast came toppling aft
along the ship's length, so the running rigging
showered into the bilge.

On the afterdeck

945 the mast had hit the steersman a slant blow
bashing the skull in, knocking him overside,
as the brave soul fled the body, like a diver.
With crack on crack of thunder, Zeus let fly
a bolt against the ship, a direct hit,
950 so that she bucked, in reeking fumes of sulphur,
and all the men were flung into the sea.
They came up 'round the wreck, bobbing awhile
like petrels⁷⁶ on the waves.

No more seafaring

homeward for these, no sweet day of return;
955 the god had turned his face from them.

I clambered

fore and aft my hulk until a comber
split her, keel from ribs, and the big timber
floated free; the mast, too, broke away.

A backstay floated dangling from it, stout
960 rawhide rope, and I used this for lashing
mast and keel together. These I straddled,
riding the frightful storm.

Nor had I yet
seen the worst of it: for now the west wind
dropped, and a southeast gale came on—one more
965 twist of the knife—taking me north again,
straight for Charybdis. All that night I drifted,
and in the sunrise, sure enough, I lay
off Scylla mountain and Charybdis deep.
There, as the whirlpool drank the tide, a billow
970 tossed me, and I sprang for the great fig tree,
catching on like a bat under a bough.
Nowhere had I to stand, no way of climbing,
The root and bole⁷⁷ being far below, and far
above my head the branches and their leaves,
975 massed, overshadowing Charybdis pool.
But I clung grimly, thinking my mast and keel
would come back to the surface when she spouted.

And ah! how long, with what desire, I waited!
till, at the twilight hour, when one who hears
980 and judges pleas in the marketplace all day
between contentious men, goes home to supper,
the long poles at last reared from the sea.

Now I let go with hands and feet, plunging
straight into the foam beside the timbers,
985 pulled astride, and rowed hard with my hands
to pass by Scylla. Never could I have passed her
had not the Father of gods and men,⁷⁸ this time,
kept me from her eyes. Once through the strait,
nine days I drifted in the open sea
990 before I made shore, buoyed up by the gods,
upon Ogygia⁷⁹ Isle. The dangerous nymph
Calypso lives and sings there, in her beauty,
and she received me, loved me.

But why tell
the same tale that I told last night in hall
995 to you and to your lady? Those adventures
made a long evening, and I do not hold
with tiresome repetition of a story.”

NOTES

77. **bole** (bohl) *n.* tree trunk.

78. **Father . . . men** Zeus.

79. **Ogygia** (o JIHJ ee uh)