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RANSOM

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The sea has many voices. The voice this man is listening for is the voice of his mother. He lifts his head, turns his face to the chill air that moves in across the gulf, and tastes its sharp salt on his lip. The sea surface bellies and glistens, a lustrous silver-blue – a membrane stretched to a fine transparency where once, for nine changes of the moon, he had hung curled in a dream of pre-existence and was rocked and comforted. He hunkers down now on the shelving pebbles at its edge, bunches his cloak between his thighs. Chin down, shoulders hunched, attentive.

The gulf can be wild at times, its voices so loud in a man's head that it is like standing stilled in the

midst of battle. But today in the dawn light it is pondlike. Small waves slither to his sandalled feet, then sluice away with a rattling sound as the smooth stones loosen and go rolling.

The man is a fighter, but when he is not fighting he is a farmer, earth is his element. One day, he knows, he will go back to it. All the grains that were miraculously called together at his birth to make just these hands, these feet, this corded forearm, will separate and go their own ways again. He is a child of earth. But for the whole of his life he has been drawn, in his other nature, to his mother's element. To what, in all its many forms, as ocean, pool, stream, is shifting and insubstantial. To what accepts, in a moment of stillness, the reflection of a face, a tree in leaf, but holds nothing, and itself cannot be held.

As a child he had his own names for the sea. He would repeat them over and over under his breath as a way of calling to her till the syllables shone and became her presence. In the brimming moon-

light of his sleeping chamber, at midday in his father's garden, among oakwoods when summer gales bullied and the full swing of afternoon came crashing, he felt himself caught up and tenderly enfolded as her low voice whispered on his skin. Do you hear me, Achilles? It is me, I am still with you. For a time I can be with you when you call.

He was five then, six. She was his secret. He floated in the long soft swirlings of her hair.

But she had warned him from the beginning that she would not always be with him. She had given him up. That was the hard condition of his being and of all commerce between them. One day when he put his foot down on the earth he knew at once that something was different. A gift he had taken as natural to him, the play of a dual self that had allowed him, in a moment, to slip out of his hard boyish nature and become eel-like, fluid, weightless, without substance in his mother's arms, had been withdrawn. From now on she would be no more than a faint far-off echo to his senses, an underwater humming.

He had grieved. But silently, never permitting himself to betray to others what he felt.

Somewhere in the depths of sleep his spirit had

made a crossing and not come back, or it had been snatched up and transformed. When he bent and chose a stone for his slingshot it had a new weight in his hand, and the sling had a different tension. He was his father's son and mortal. He had entered the rough world of men, where a man's acts follow him wherever he goes in the form of story. A world of pain, loss, dependency, bursts of violence and elation; of fatality and fatal contradictions, breathless leaps into the unknown; at last of death – a hero's death out there in full sunlight under the gaze of gods and men, for which the hardened self, the hardened body, had daily to be exercised and prepared.

A breeze touches his brow. Far out where the gulf deepens, small waves kick up, gather, then collapse, and new ones replace them; and this, even as he watches, repeats itself, and will do endlessly whether he is here or not to observe it: that is what he sees. In the long vista of time he might already be gone. It is time, not space, he is staring into.

For nine years winter and summer they have

been cooped up here on the beach, all the vast horde of them, Greeks of every clan and kingdom, from Argos and Sparta and Boeotia, from Euboea, Crete, Ithaca, Cos and the other islands, or like himself and his men, his Myrmidons, from Phthia. Days, years, season after season; an endless interim of keeping your weapons in good trim and your keener self taut as a bowstring through long stretches of idleness, of restless, patient waiting, and shameful quarrels and unmanly bragging and talk.

Such a life is death to the warrior spirit. Which if it is to endure at the high point needs action – the clash of arms that settles a quarrel quickly, then sends a man back, refreshed in spirit, to being a good farmer again.

War should be practised swiftly, decisively. Thirty days at most, in the weeks between new spring growth and harvest, when the corn is tinder-dry and ripe for the invader's brand, then back to the cattle pace of the farmer's life. To calendar days and what comes with them; to seedtime and ploughing and the garnering of grain. To tramping in your old sandals across sunstruck fields, all dry sticks and the smell of wild mint underfoot. To sitting about in the shade doling out the small change of gossip, and

listening, while flies buzz and the sweat streams from your armpits, to interminable disputes – the administering of justice on home ground. To pruning olives, and watching, over months, the swelling of a broodmare's belly or the sprouting of the first pale blade among sods. To noting how far a son has grown since last year's notch on a doorjamb.

In these nine years his own son, Neoptolemus, away there in his grandfather's house, has been growing up without him. Days, weeks, season after season.

The sun is climbing now. He pushes to his feet. Stands for a last moment filled with his thoughts; his mind, even in its passive state, the most active part of him. Then, head down, his cloak drawn close about him, starts back along the sloping beach towards the camp.

There is a singing in the air, so high-pitched that it might be spirits. It comes from the rigging of the ships that swing at anchor, recent arrivals, or are drawn up in pinewood cradles along the strand.

There are more than a thousand of them. Their spars, in silhouette against the pallid sky, are like a forest magically transported. After so many months ashore, their hulls are white as bone. They stretch in a line back to the camp, and on the sea side make one of its walls.

He moves quickly now, it is cold out of the sun. Walking awkwardly against the slope of the beach, he has a drunken gait. His sandals slip on the pebbles, some of which are as large and smooth as duck eggs. Between them, brown-gold bladderwrack still damp from the tide.

When the last of the line of ships is behind him, he pauses and takes a long look out across the gulf. The sea, all fire, spreads flat to the horizon. So solid-looking and without depth, so enticing as a place to move to, that a man might be tempted to make a sharp turn right and try walking on it, and only when it opened and took him down discover he had been tricked by a freak of nature.

But the sea is not where it will end. It will end here on the beach in the treacherous shingle, or out there on the plain. That is fixed, inevitable. With the pious resignation of the old man he will never become, he has accepted this.

But in some other part of himself, the young man he is resists, and it is the buried rage of that resistance that drives him out each morning to tramp the shore. Not quite alone. With his ghosts.

Patroclus, his soulmate and companion since childhood.

Hector, implacable enemy.

Patroclus had simply appeared one afternoon in his father's court, a boy three years older than himself and nearly a head taller. Thin-jawed, intense, with the hands and feet, already disproportionately large, of the man he was growing into.

Achilles had been hunting in one of the ravines beyond the palace. He had killed a hare. Great whoops of triumph preceding him, he had come bounding up the steps into the courtyard to show his father what he had got.

Ten years old. Long-haired, wiry, burnt black by the Phthian sun. Still half-wild. His soul not yet settled in him.

Peleus was angry at the intrusion. He turned to

reprove the boy, but gentled when he saw what it was. He gestured to Achilles to be still. Then, with a small helpless showing of his palms – You see what it is, I too am a fond parent – apologised to his guest, Menoetius, King of Opus, for this unintended discourtesy.

Achilles, still panting from his long run in across the fields, set himself to be patient. Idly at first, with no intimation of what all this would one day mean to him, assuming still that the centre of the occasion was the hare trailing gout of blood where it hung from his wrist, he stood shifting from foot to foot, waiting for the visitor's business to be done and his father's attention to be his.

The story Menoetius had to tell was a shocking one.

The boy with the big hands and feet was his son, Patroclus. Ten days ago, in a quarrel over a game of knucklebones, he had struck and killed one of his companions, the ten-year-old son of Amphidamas, a high official of the royal court. Menoetius was bringing the boy to Phthia as an outcast seeking asylum.

In a voice still hollow with wonder at how, in an instant, so many lives could be flung about and

broken, the unhappy man led them back to the fatal morning.

Two players, fiercely engaged in the rivalries of the game, squatting in the shade of a colonnade and laughing. Taunting one another as young boys will. Eyes raised to follow the knucklebones as they climb, with nothing untoward in view.

For a long moment the taws hang there at the top of their flight; as if, in the father's grave retelling of these events, he were allowing for a gap to be opened where this time round some higher agency might step in and, with the high-handed indifference of those who have infinite power over the world of conjunction and accident, reverse what is about to occur. The silence is screwed up a notch. Even the cicadas have shut off mid-shriek.

The boy whose fate is suspended here stands with parted lips, though no breath passes between them; lost, as they all are, in a story he might be hearing for the first time and which has not yet found its end.

Achilles, too, stands spellbound. Like a sleeper who has stumbled in on another's dream, he sees what is about to happen but can neither move nor cry out to prevent it. His right arm is so heavy (he

has forgotten the hare) that he may never lift it again. The blow is about to come.

The boy Patroclus tilts his chin, thin brows drawn in expectation, a little moisture lighting the down on his upper lip, and for the first time Achilles meets his gaze. Patroclus looks at him. The blow connects, bone on bone. And the boy, his clear eyes still fixed on Achilles, takes it. With just a slight jerk of the shoulders, an almost imperceptible intake of breath.

Achilles is as stunned as if the blow was to himself. He turns quickly to his father, on whose word so much depends.

But there is no need to add his own small weight of entreaty. Peleus too is moved by the spectacle of this boy with the mark of the outcast upon him, the brand of the killer, who stands waiting in a kind of no-man's-land to be readmitted to the companionship of men.

So it was settled. Patroclus was to be his adoptive brother, and the world, for Achilles, reassembled

itself around a new centre. His true spirit leapt forth and declared itself. It was as if he had all along needed this other before he could become fully himself. From this moment on he could conceive of nothing in the life he must live that Patroclus would not share in and approve.

But things did not always go smoothly between them. There were times when Patroclus was difficult to approach, too touchily aware that, for all Achilles' brotherly affection, he himself was a courtier, a dependant here. He would draw back, all pride and a hurt that could not easily be assuaged. What Achilles saw then on the clouded brow was what he had been so struck by in the first glance that had passed between them – the daunted look that had captured his soul before he even knew that he had one – and he would hear again, as if the memory were his own, what Patroclus was hearing: the knock of bone on bone as two lives collided and were irrevocably changed.

No, Achilles told himself, not two lives, three. Because when Patroclus relived the moment now, he too was there. Breath held, too dazed, too spirit-bound to move, he looked on dreamlike as that other – the small son of Amphidamas, whose face

he had never seen – was casually struck aside to make way for him.

He thought often of that boy. They were mated. But darkly, flesh to ghost. As in a different way, but through the same agency and in the same moment, he had been mated with Patroclus.

The end when it came was abrupt, though not entirely accidental.

After weeks of truce, the war had resumed with a new ferocity, at first in isolated skirmishes, then, when it emerged that there was division among the Greeks and that Achilles, the most formidable of them, had withdrawn his forces, in a general assault. Hector, slaughtering on all sides, had stormed the walls of the encampment and fought his way to the Greek ships. The Greek cause had become desperate.

So too had Patroclus. Held back from the fight because of Achilles' quarrel with the generals, he was going earnestly from place to place about the camp hearing news of the death of this man, the

wounding to near death of another, all dear companions. He said nothing, but his pure heart was torn, Achilles saw, between their old deep affection for one another, which till now had been beyond question, and a kind of doubt, of shame even. He sees my indifference to the fate of these Greeks as a stain to my honour, Achilles told himself, and to his own.

He knew every movement of Patroclus' soul – how could he not after so long? – but would not allow himself to be swayed.

Patroclus had appeared at last in the hut and positioned himself, grim-faced and silently distraught, on a stool close to the entrance where his presence could not be ignored. There he waited.

Achilles, full of resentment at being judged, even in silence, and called to account, went on busying himself with nothing. Every moment of disunity between them was a torment to him. His quarrel with Agamemnon was a just one, his pride was touched. Did he have to argue that again? Agamemnon, because he was by nature vain and contentious, or because he had all along envied the ascendancy among them of a younger man, had openly insulted him.

The generals had awarded him as a prize of war a captured slave-girl, Briseis, and in the time she had been with him he had grown fond of her. Then Agamemnon's own prize, Chryseis, was ransomed and sent back to Troy, and the great commander, in his lordly way, had claimed *his* prize, Briseis, in her place. He had refused of course and not politely. And when Agamemnon, incensed at the rebuff, had roared and raged and crudely berated him, he too lost his temper and, barely able to restrain himself from striking the man, had stormed out of the assembly, retired to his hut, refused all further contact and withdrawn his troops from the battle-lines.

If the Greek generals were suffering now they had only themselves to blame. He and all his followers, including Patroclus, and his father Peleus, and their homeland Phthia, had been subjected to outrageous affront.

Of course he knew only too well what Patroclus intended by his brooding presence, and had for a long time endured it; but unused, where Patroclus was concerned, to holding in what he felt, had let angry disappointment at last get the better of him.

'If all this touches you so deeply, Patroclus,' he had flashed out, '*you* go and save the Greeks.'

‘I will, since the great Achilles won’t do it,’ Patroclus hit back. And hand on sword he sprang to his feet. There were tears in his eyes.

They had stood then, appalled, both, by what had been said. Achilles was trembling; too proud to admit, even to this man who was half himself, that he might be in the wrong, but heartsick, stricken. When had they last quarrelled like this, he and Patroclus? When had he last seen Patroclus weep? The tears, he knew, were for him, he felt the hotness of them in his own throat. Even more for this unhappy rift between them.

‘Patroclus,’ he had whispered, and turned away.

‘Achilles, let me go,’ Patroclus begged, whispering himself now, though there were no others by. ‘Let me go and take the Myrmidons with me. Lend me your armour. When the Trojans see your helmet and shield they will think it is Achilles who has returned to the field, and draw back and give our friends a breathing space. Achilles, I beg you.’

Filled with misgiving but suddenly drained of all will, Achilles had found himself assenting. When Patroclus, after so many days of tension, in a burst of joyful reconciliation clasped him to his breast, he had been convinced for a moment that all might be

as Patroclus suggested, and could be turned about and made good. And when Patroclus, armed but not yet helmeted, himself again though the armour was not his, stood smiling before him, he too had smiled, though the feeling he caught from his dear friend's glowing freshness, the assurance and high spirits of the warrior armed for battle, did not last.

Alone in the hut again, feverish, drawn in upon himself, and with a heaviness like waking sleep upon him, he heard a shout go up from the assembled Greeks: his name – 'Achilles!' – then its echo from the Trojan lines, a hollow murmur like a rising wind.

Feeling hollow himself, as if his packed chest and limbs were without substance, he had got to his feet, and reeling a little, stepped outside to observe for himself what was under way.

Out there on the glittering plain, a figure dressed like him and moving as he did, resplendent in his harness, breastplate and greaves and holding aloft his studded shield, was standing alone between the lines. When the Greeks for a second time shouted his name, the figure turned in acknowledgement. His right arm jerked and hoisted aloft the flashing shield.

There was a rush, a great noise of raucous breath and clashing metal. Swords, heads, shoulders everywhere. ‘Patroclus!’ he had shouted, but silently, his cry snuffed out in the far-off spaces of his skull by the clangorous ringing of bronze against hammered bronze, as the helmet with the horsehair crest and nodding plume – *his* helmet, which every man at Troy, Greek and Trojan, recognised as his and knew him by – at a sudden swing as from nowhere (the gods again, their second thrust!) was struck from his head, and Patroclus, open-mouthed with astonishment, stepped back a pace, then staggered and went crashing.

He had wept for Patroclus. Wept without restraint. Sitting cross-legged on the ground, rocking back and forth in his anguish, pouring fistfuls of dust over his head.

Two days later, looking exactly as he had in life, the ghost of Patroclus had come to where he lay apart from the others, curled up like a child on the open beach on rounded stones that smelled of his

mother, dry-damp seagrass. Over the long-drawn-out sobbing of the waves, Patroclus had begged him, in his old voice, tenderly, to cease calling so piteously upon him, to bury his body with all proper ceremony, but quickly, and to let his spirit go at last and make its way among the dead; and from that night on, Patroclus, for all his lying sleepless on his pallet, and watching, and waiting – though he restrains himself from calling – has not come back.

His bones now, the twelve long bones, the burnt-out brainpan, the handful of splintered fragments they had gathered from the ashes of his pyre, are in the wide-mouthed urn in the barrow Achilles has raised to his dear friend's memory. Where in time his own will join them.

‘Just a little longer, Patroclus,’ he whispers. ‘Can you hear me? Soon, now. Soon.’

But first he had Patroclus' killer to deal with, in a last encounter out there under the walls of Troy.

The armour Hector wore was the armour he had stripped from the body of Patroclus, Achilles' own,

which Hector wore now to mock him: the helmet with its horsehair crest and plumes, the bronze harness that hung from his shoulders, the greaves with their silver clasps at ankle and knee.

Confronting an enemy so armed, at close quarters, sword to sword at the end of an hour-long pursuit, dodging this way and that to anticipate or avoid the other's thrusts, searching out, as he knew it from within, the one unprotected place in the corselet – at the gullet, where the collarbone yields to the soft flesh of the neck – was like trying to deceive or outguess his shadow, and aiming, beyond Hector, at himself. And Hector's death when it came, in *his* armour, like watching for a second time the dreamlike enactment of his own.

He dodged and feinted, found the place, and grim-faced but secretly smiling eased the heavy weapon in.

Hector, eyes wide with disbelief, dropped his sword, reached out and closed his fist on Achilles' own. With the hot sweat streaming from his brow, every muscle in his forearm knotted in a last act of defiance, he met Achilles' gaze.

Achilles grunted, gave the sword another push. The whole weight of his body hung on the thrust.

Weightless himself. All the force of his brute presence gone now into the blade as he urged it in. There was a still, extended moment when they were joined, he and Hector, by three hand-spans of tempered bronze.

On his knees in the dust, Hector gazed up at him, his grip still locked on Achilles' fist. And despite the death-wound he had received, in a spirit untouched by the old rancour, with an almost brotherly concern, he spoke to Achilles with the last of his breath; as men, both, for whom this moment was sacred; a meeting that from the beginning had been the clear goal of their lives and the final achievement of what they were. Man to man, but impersonally. So that Achilles, leaning close, felt a shiver go through him as he recognised the precise point where Hector's own breath gave out and what replaced it was the voice of a god.

'You will not long outlive me, Achilles,' the voice whispered. Then, 'The days are few now that you have to walk on the earth. To eat and exchange talk with your companions and enjoy the pleasures of women. Already, away there in your father's house in Phthia, they are preparing to mourn.'

Achilles, leaning in over his sword to catch the

last of Hector's breath, felt the big body sway a moment, then stagger. Brought down by its own weight, blood gushing from the soft place between neck and clavicle, it detached itself from the blade and rolled slowly back.

Achilles too staggered a moment. He felt his soul change colour. Blood pooled at his feet, and though he continued to stand upright and triumphant in the sun, his spirit set off on its own downward path and approached the borders of an unknown region. For the length of a heartbeat it hesitated, then went on.

How long he passed in that twilight kingdom he would never know. It was another, more obdurate self that found its way back; and stood unmoved, unmoving, as his Myrmidons formed a cordon round Hector's corpse and stripped it of its armour – harness, corselet, greaves – till all it was left with was the short tunic, now soiled with sweat and torn and drenched with blood, that was Hector's own. Then he stood watching again as one by one, without passion, but also without pity, they plunged their swords into Hector's unprotected flesh; with each blow shouting his name, so that all those watching from the walls of Troy would hear

it, and Hector too, wherever he might be on his downward path into the underworld, would hear it and look mournfully back.

Achilles watched. Himself like a dead man. Feeling nothing.

When they were done and had stepped away, he roused himself and approached the body. Stood staring down at it. Then, taking a knife from his belt, he fell to one knee, and swiftly, as if he had always known that this was what he would do, slashed one after the other from ankle to heel the tendons of Hector's feet.

His men looked on. They could not imagine what he was up to.

Unwinding from his waist an oxhide thong, he lifted the feet and lashed them together; then, with the thong wound tight around his wrist, dragged the corpse to his chariot. Passing the thong once, twice, three times round the beechwood axlebar, he made it fast to the car. Jerked the hide to see that it would hold. Then, like a man obeying the needs of some other, darker agency, he leapt onto the platform, dashed the stinging sweat-drops from his eyes, touched the horses lightly with the traces and wheeled out onto the plain, half-turning from

time to time to observe how the body, its head and shoulders bouncing over the dry uneven ground, swung in a wide arc behind him.

They were moving slowly as yet. The horses, excited by his presence and the promise of exercise, jerked their heads.

Leaning forward, he whispered to them, dark syllables of horse magic, then loosed the reins.

Behind him the body, its locks already grey with dust, leapt and followed, the hip-bones and the shoulderblades of the massive back dashing hard against sharp-edged flinty stones and ridges as, time after time with gathering speed, the wheels of the light car took to the air, then struck down hard again in a shower of sparks. Faster and faster he drove, up and down under the walls of Troy, his hair loose and flying, gouts of sweat flung from his brow, as Hector's corpse, raw now from head to foot and caked with dust, bounded and tumbled, and Priam, Hector's father, and his mother Hecuba, and his wife Andromache with the child Astyanax at her hip, and Hector's brothers and brothers-in-law and their wives, and all the common people of Troy, who had flocked to every vantage point on the walls, looked on.

Still he felt nothing. Only the tautness of the muscles in his forearm where all the veins were puffed and thickened, and in his toes where they gripped the platform of the car. Only the humming of the air, and its scorching touch as it eddied round and past him.

He was waiting for the rage to fill him that would be equal at last to the outrage he was committing. That would assuage his grief, and be so convincing to the witnesses of this barbaric spectacle that he too might believe there was a living man at the centre of it, and that man himself.

In full sunlight now, face taut and wind-chopped, the skin over his cheekbones stiff with salt, salt on his dry lips when he wets them, Achilles comes to the outskirts of the camp.

All is activity here, the day has begun. From off in the distance a lowing of cattle, a bleating of sheep crowded close in their pens. In the stillness somewhere, the knock of an axe.

But the sun has not yet reached the encamp-

ment. A powdering of frost whitens the base of the pine-trunks that make up the high stockade wall. Small fires are burning, most of them no more now than embers, sending up thin trails of smoke. The guards who crouch beside them, or stride up and down flapping their arms in the morning chill, are wakeful but sleepy-eyed at the end of their watch.

They are men from his home country, clear-spirited and secure in their animal nature, unacquainted with second thoughts. Their sinewy limbs and hard-bitten features, like his own, come from tramping the craggy uplands that in summer, when hawks hang on updraughts over the granite peaks, are ablaze with a compacted heat that invests the whole upper air with its fiery intensity, and in winter become tracts of ice. Their fathers are smallholders who raise wheat in the deep soil of the flatlands and grow small sweet grapes on the ridges above; keep herds of long-horned cattle, and sheep whose milk goes into the curds their women make. On their tongues, as on his, the harsh north-country dialect, full of insults that are also backhanded terms of affection. Its wry jokes and weather-rhymes are the proof in their mouths

of a link between them that is older than the oaths of loyalty they swear.

They have the minds of hawks, these men, of foxes and of the wolves that come at night to the snowy folds and are tracked and hunted. They love him. He has long since won their love. It is unconditional.

But when they look at him these days, what they see confounds them. They no longer know what authority they are under. He is their leader, but he breaks daily every rule they have been taught to live by. Their only explanation is that he is mad. That some rough-haired god has darkened his mind and moves now like an opposing stranger in him, occupying the place where reason and rule should be, and sleep, and honour of other men and the gods.

He makes his way past them, and on to where his horses are kept, and the fast light chariot where Patroclus once stood beside him is housed in its shed. He calls up his grooms. Orders them, as he has each morning now for eleven days, to lead out his horses, wheel out his chariot and make all ready for use.

The men obey, but they know what he has in mind and cannot bear to meet his eye.

He watches them work, striding impatiently up and down the yard. On the lookout for some fault he may find with them. Inwardly raging.

But they know how he is these mornings and take care. When the horses come trotting out they are combed and glossy, the spokes and felloes of the chariot wheels have been sponged clean, the rails of the car freshly burnished. They have done their work well. He is punctilious, but so are they. Let him rage as he will and do his looking.

They smile at one another, but show nothing when, after walking twice around the car and stopping half a dozen times to scrutinise their work, he nods and turns to the horses.

These horses were a gift from the gods at his parents' wedding. Balius and Xanthus, they are called. He whispers a word or two in their ear that the grooms do not catch, and they lift their heads, shake their oiled manes, their dark coats rippling. Though they have a divine spark and are immortal, they are also creatures like any other, and so sensitive in their animal nature, so responsive to every shift of their master's thought, that they seem endowed with a reason and sympathy that is almost human.

Xanthus, the more nervous, the more impulsive of the two, is Achilles' favourite. He lays his hand now, very gently, on the satiny hide; senses the lightning quiver of muscle under the almost transparent skin. Leaning close to the leathery soft lip, and feeling warm breath on his cheek, he experiences a rush of tenderness that might be for himself; of awe too at the other life of this magic being; and when he observes the eyes of the grooms upon him with their question – What's he up to now? – a kind of envy for how free the creature is of a self-consciousness that at times makes us strange to ourselves and darkly divided.

He gives Xanthus a hearty thwack on the rump, then, leaping nimbly into the car, drives slowly to where Hector's corpse, the feet still lashed together, the arms outflung, lies tumbled in the dirt. No need to get down. He can see from where he stands that all is as it was yesterday, and the day before, and as it has been each day since the beginning. The gods continue to defy him.

Hector lies as if sleeping. His features are those of a young bridegroom newly refreshed, his locks glossy-black as in life, the brow like marble, all the welts and gashes where yesterday bone showed

through smoothly sealed and the torn flesh made whole again.

Half-blind with rage, Achilles jumps down from the car, hoists the corpse by its feet to the axlebar, and with a brutal swiftness loops the thong three times round the bar, jerks it firm, then savagely knots it. He is dealing with a sack of bones. As the dogs know, who yelp and howl at having been kept so long from what they would tear at.

‘Later,’ their keeper whispers as, crouched beside them and holding fast to their leads, he watches Achilles at his task. ‘Later, my loves,’ he tells them. ‘When *he* is finished with it.’

Achilles has remounted the car. A trail of dust billows behind him as he drives out across the plain. Ahead, the barrow with the bones of Patroclus, marking the spot where he had erected the pyre, a hundred feet long, a hundred feet wide, where Patroclus was burned.

Fat sheep and cattle had been slaughtered round the base. He himself had cut gobbets of fat from the carcasses and covered the body with them; laid precious two-handled jars filled with oil and honey against the bier, and cast four splendid horses on the pyre that screamed and shook fire from their

coats when their throats were slashed. He had cut the throats as well of two of the nine dogs Patroclus kept, and dragged a dozen highborn Trojan prisoners to the place, all the time raging and weeping. And still it was not enough. Still his grief was not consumed.

All that great pile of offerings is gone now over the plain, as smuts and scattered ashes. Only the barrow remains, and the urn with his dear friend's bones.

Achilles slows as he approaches it. The horses lift their feet in a ceremonial trot, the wheels of the chariot barely turning.

From the platform of the car, hawk-faced and grim, Achilles looks down. The tears he brings fall inwardly, his cheeks are dry. He glances back over his shoulder to where Hector lies face-down in the dust. All this, he tells himself, is for you, Patroclus.

But it is never enough. That is what he feels. That is what torments him.

With a jerk of the reins he pulls the horses to the left, and with a great shout sets them off at a furious pace to gallop once, twice, three times round the barrow, the body of Hector, as it tumbles

behind, raising a dust cloud that swirls and thickens as if at that spot on the plain a storm had gathered and for long minutes raged and twisted while all around it the world remained still.

In the yard a thousand paces off, the grooms stand with shaded eyes, watching. The guards pause in their tasks around the camp.

Higher and higher the column climbs, spreading its branches. Then it stills, hangs, and comes sifting down in shadowy streaks like distant rain.

Achilles is driving back now. Leaden-limbed, covered from head to toe in dust. Grey-headed with it. His face, arms, clothes, hands caked with it. Like a man who has climbed out of his grave.

He is as fouled with dust as the thing – bloody and unrecognisable – that he trails from his axle-bar.

Tired now, his wrists like water, he drives to where the grooms wait in the yard.

It offends them, though they dare not show it, that he should bring back horses that just minutes ago went out glossy and sprightly on their feet, all ghostly grey and foaming.

He climbs down from the car. Says nothing as he throws the reins to the first man who comes running.

He will sleep now. Too tired even to wash, he goes immediately to his hut, rolls up in his cloak on a pallet in the corner and within seconds is drowned in oblivion.

Swiftness of foot is his special distinction among the Greeks: Achilles the Runner. The quickness of his spirit to haul air into his lungs, to feed their overplus of energy and lightness to his footsoles and heels, to the muscles of his calves, the long tendons of his thighs, is an animal quality he shares with the wolves of his native uplands, bodies elongated, fur laid flat as they run under the wind.

His runner spirit has deserted him. It is the earth-heaviness in him of all his organs, beginning with the heart, that he must throw off if he is to be himself again.

He is waiting for the break. For something to appear that will break the spell that is on him, the self-consuming rage that drives him and wastes his spirit in despair. Something new and unimaginable as yet that will confront him with the need, in

meeting it, to leap clear of the clogging grey web that enfolds him.

Meanwhile, day after day, he rages, shames himself, calls silently on a spirit that does not answer, and sleeps.