In the Seas of Hatred: Poseidon and Odysseus

1. Narrator

Poseidon, lord of the quake, your seas
embrace the earth. You rule the squids,
the sharks, the whales, monsters of the deep,
and nymphs who sing your praises.
Beardon, the artist of legends, puts your roots
in Africa, designs your ceremonial mask,
sea robes, a brass shield, the trident that whips
up a surge, compels the wind to whirl,
waves to foam and crash. Homer tells us
you have friends in Ethiopia — and why not Africa? —
We all owe our beginnings to its rivers and rift valleys
before the continent was imagined and named. What
we inherit stems from the crooked circuits of odysseys
and long odds, bets the gods made on our survival.

2. The Seamen

We have to get out of this cave, Odysseus,
before the Cyclops comes our way.
Let’s steal his sheep, snatch his cheeses
and, quick, load up and put out to sea.
We’re in grave danger, no reason to stay.
Let us leave this cave, Odysseus.

That monster could smash us to pieces,
grind our bones, pulverize us like grain.
Make off with his sheep, don’t forget the cheeses.

Let the giant milk his ewes and go to sleep.
What would we tell him, what could we say?
Let us leave this cave Odysseus.

You’re wily Odysseus, but Cyclops does what he pleases.
We’ll be trapped in his lair, the gods far away,
grab some of his sheep and his good cheeses.

We are invaders, lost raiders of cities,
restless seaman ready to get under way.
Steal the Cyclops sheep, snatch his cheeses.
We have to leave this cave, Odysseus.
3. Odysseus

I told the Cyclops we’re warriors protected by Zeus.
We’re supplicants and guests protected by Zeus.
Cyclops, he said, pay no heed to weak gods.

In the evening, the Cyclops ate two of my men.
In the morning, he swallowed two more of them,
crushed them, devoured them, bone and ligament.

Night and morning a doorstone sealed his cave,
monstrous boulder, a stone we could not roll,
could not roll it away, no escape, no escape.

Found a tree trunk cut it into a stake.
Cut that olive tree trunk into a sturdy stake,
hardened it in fire, buried it in manure.

We plied him with honey and golden wine,
got him drunk and down on our good wine,
and smashed his eye with our fire-hot stake.

Night and morning a doorstone sealed his cave,
that monstrous boulder we could never roll away,
could not roll away, no escape, no easy escape.

I tied my men to the bellies of his sheep.
His sheep carried away my men beneath their bellies.
I hid myself in the belly fleece of his prize ram.

I wanted the Cyclops to know who bested him.
I wanted Polyphemus to know I am Odysseus.
Cry you big baby, cry to the lord of the wine-dark sea.

Night and morning, a doorstone sealed his cave,
too big for us to roll away. Blind Cyclops rolled the stone away, we got away, but it wasn’t easy, never easy.
Let the big baby cry, cry to the lord of the wine-dark sea.

4. Poseidon

Too-crafty Odysseus, you fouled my waters,
smashed my son’s only eye, leaving him
helplessly blind and crying. He’s a giant
but only a boy, a shepherd who daily milks his ewes, a maker of fine cheeses and curds. You boast of your cunning and courage, but you’re a wanton warrior, who notches his shields with names of enemies injured or killed. You stole my son’s prize ram, filched his best cheeses, trampled his honor. I will shatter your ships, destroy your men, hurl you like a bundle of rags against sea cliffs, shred your skin, dump your body on a sand spit, where the scavenger birds will pick the flesh from your bones.

© Richard Roe 2013