

I myself saw Neopolemus seeing for slaughter and the Atreidae too. I saw Hecuba, one hundred young women, and Priam, defiling with his blood the fires he had himself consecrated. The hundred bedchambers, the great hopes for grandchildren, and the magnificent doorways adorned with the golden spoils of the barbarians—all were destroyed. The Danaans occupied what the fire had not burned.

21 Aeneas Describes the Death of Priam (506-558)

Perhaps you would like to know what happened to Priam. When he saw the doom of the captured city and that the enemy had crashed through the entrance and now occupied the inner parts of his palace, he armed himself with the weapons of his youth, shoulders trembling, now too old. He attached to his side a useless sword. He headed out into the great host of the enemy and into certain death.

In the middle of the palace there was a huge altar beneath the open sky. Nearby an ancient laurel tree hung over it and embraced the household gods with its shadow. Here Hecuba and her daughters sat close together, embracing the statues of the gods. When she saw Priam wearing the armor fit for a young man, she said:

"What grim intention, miserable soul, has compelled you to arm yourself with these weapons? Where are you going? This is not the time for this kind of help or defense. No, not even if my Hector were here now. Come, retreat to this spot. Either this altar will protect us all, or we will all die together."

Thus she spoke and sat the old man down by the altar.

Suddenly, Polites, one of Priam's sons, slipped away from Pyrrhus' onslaught and was fleeing through the missiles, through the enemy, along the broad colonnades and the empty rooms, wounded. Pyrrhus was ablaze and pursuing him with a weapon poised to kill. Now and again he almost had him, pressing hard on his heels with his spear. When Polites eventually reached the eyes of his parents, he fell, pouring out his life in a great deal of blood. Then Priam, although in the grip of death, did not hold off or refrain from expressing his anger:

"May the gods above repay your crime with just punishments, since you forced me to view the death of my son and defiled a father's countenance with his death. And yet, that famous man, whom you falsely swear is your father, Achilles, was not so heartless toward me, Priam, though I was his enemy. No, he respected the rights and good faith of a suppliant, and so he returned Hector's lifeless body to me for burial and sent me back to my kingdom."

Thus the elder man spoke and weakly threw a spear that did not penetrate the changing shield but was beaten back, and it struck on the surface of its boss.

Pyrrhus responded:

"You, then, will go to my father, the son of Peleus, and take him this message yourself. Remember to tell him about my awful deeds and how Neopolemus is worse than his father. Now die!"

As he spoke, he dragged Priam to the altar, trembling and slipping in the great pool of his son's blood. Neopolemus gripped Priam's hair with his left hand; with his right he unsheathed his flashing sword and buried it to the hilt in his side.

This was the last moment of Priam's appointed destiny; this was the fated end that stole him away as he gazed upon Troy in flames and the Pergamene towers in ruins. The man who once ruled so proudly over so many lands and peoples of Asia, his huge torso now lies on the shore, head wreathed from shoulders.

6.237-6.755 Aeneas Goes to the Underworld

Odysseus' visit to the underworld in Homer's *Odyssey* is Vergil's model, but with many important differences. Homer in no uncertain terms treats the underworld as a grim place; we are all subject to death, and death brings no joy. Vergil, on the other hand, incorporates philosophical ideas about death and the underworld, not least of which is the Pythagorean notion of metempsychosis, whereby souls of certain men are reborn in new bodies on earth (compare the Myth of Er in Plato, *Republic* 10).² Further, Vergil gives a coherent picture of the underworld, dividing it into three sections: Limbo, where the souls of the unfortunate are located; Tartarus, where the wicked are punished; and the Blessed Groves, where heroes enjoy a blissful afterlife (see *Map of the Underworld*, p. xli). Aeneas is guided through the underworld by the Sibyl, Apollo's priestess at Cumae in southern Italy, who has already helped Aeneas get the Golden Bough, a magical branch required for the living to visit the underworld.

6a The Way to the Underworld (237-268)

The cave of Avernus was deep, gaping monstrously like jaws, jagged and sheltered by a dark pool and the shadows of the forest. No winged creature could direct its flight safely above it, so noxious were the fumes pouring forth from its dark fissures into the dome of heaven.³ Here the priestess first set out four steers with hides of black and tipped out wine upon their brows. Then she clipped the ends of the bristles between their horns and placed them, the first offerings, onto the sacred fires, voicing an invocation to Hecate, powerful in heaven as in Erebus. Her attendants put the sacrificial knives beneath their necks and caught the warm blood in bowls. Aeneas himself struck with his sword a black-fleeced lamb for the mother of the Eumenides and her great sister,⁴ and for you, Proserpina, a sterile cow. Then he fashioned nocturnal altars for the Stygian king and placed the carcasses of the bulls upon the flames whole, pouring luxurious oil over their burning entrails. Then suddenly, just before the first rays of the rising sun, the ground beneath their feet began to moan, the treetops swayed, and the sound of howling dogs was heard through the shadows as the goddess drew nearer.

"Away! O stand away, all who are impure," cried the priestess. "Step not into the grove. But you, Aeneas, enter upon this path and unsheathe your sword. Now, Aeneas, is the time for courage; now, for a stout heart!"

So much she spoke, seized by madness, and she hurried herself through the open cave. Aeneas kept pace with his guide as she went, with strides that showed no fear. Gods who lord over spirits! Souls of the silent dead! Chaos and Phlegethon, wide expanses plunged in the silence of night! Sanction me to tell what I have heard. Sanction me by your will to reveal the secrets hidden deep within the murky darkness of the earth.

6b The Descent into the Underworld (269-294)

They, but dim silhouettes, made their way beneath the lonely night through the shadows, through the empty lands of Dis, his lifeless kingdom, as if on a journey

² The line, "This is why the Greeks called the place *Χομος*," was added here, most likely by a later scribe, to make explicit Vergil's allusion to the origin of the name Avernus, for *averos* means "birdless."

³ *Arde* and *Erath* were names of the underworld.

Myth
? ? ?

through a forest beneath the stingy light of a shrouded moon when Jupiter has buried the heavens in shadows and black night has robbed the world of its colors. Before the very courtyard, in the outer jaws of Orcus, Mourning and avenging GUILTS have their quarters. Beside them dwell pale Diseases, grim Old Age, Fear, evil-unging Hunger, disgraceful Poverty—terrible apparitions all—Death and Toil, then Death's own brother Sleep, and the evils of men's minds, Joys. In the entranceway before them sit War the death-bearer, the Eumenides in their iron chambers, and demonic Discord, who ties back her hair of snakes with gore-soaked bands of wool. In the middle, a dark massive elm spreads out its branches, its ancient arms, and it is here—so common legend says—that false Dreams have their perch, clinging upside down beneath every leaf. There are many other monstrous beasts too: along the doorway the Centaurs have their stalls, as do the double-formed Scyllas, hundred-bodied Briareus, the dreadfully hissing beast of Lerna, the flame-breathing Chimæra, Gorgons, Harpies, and the shadowy, three-bodied shade.⁴

Here, trembling in sudden terror, Aeneas ripped his sword from its sheath and held the blade before him to meet the advancing shades, and if his wise companion had not told him that they were tenuous life forces without body, fluttering beneath the empty appearance of form, he would have rushed upon them, hacking vainly through the shadows with his sword.

6c The Ferryman Charon and the Crowd of Souls (295–336)

From here leads the way to the waters of Tartarean Acheron. This deep-swirling murky abyss boils and bubbles and belches all of its silt into Coccyus. The waters of this stream are watched by the ferryman Charon, a ghastly, squalid figure: upon his chin sits an unkempt mass of white hair, his eyes are fixed and fiery, and a filthy cloak drapes down from a knot on his shoulder. Alone, he pushes the boat away from shore with a pole. Alone, he attends to the sails. And, alone, he conveys the bodies across in his dusky boat, an old man now, but his is a god's old age, robust and vigorous.

Here a great throng was swarming down to the shores to meet him: mothers and husbands, bodies of great-hearted heroes robbed of life, young boys and unmarried girls, men in the prime of their lives placed on pyres before their parents' eyes—as many souls as leaves that fall in the forests under autumn's first freeze, or birds that flock together on land coming off the deep sea when the wintry season forces them across the main in search of sunny climes. They stood there, pleading to be the first to cross, and they stretched out their hands, yearning for the bank on the other side. But the grim captain took on some passengers here, some there, and all the rest he warded off, keeping them far away from the sandy bank.

Aeneas looked on in wonder, moved by the commotion, and said, "Tell me, O virgin priestess, what does this rush to the river mean? What do these souls want? Why do some souls walk away from the shore, while others sweep across the deep-hued river under oar?"

To him did the aged priestess return this brief reply, "Son of Anchises, true scion of the gods, what you see are the pools of Coccyus and the marshes of Styx, on whose divine waters the gods fear making and breaking their oaths. The whole crowd you see

here on the shore are the destitute and unburied souls. The ferryman is Charon. Those who you see ferried upon the water are the buried—he is forbidden to ferry souls across these raucous waters to the distant dread banks until their bones have found rest in their graves. For one hundred years these souls flit about upon these shores. Only then are they at last allowed to come back to the pools that they long to cross."

Anchises' son stopped and checked his step, deep in thought and feeling pity for their hard lot. There he made out two gloomy figures, men unburied, without death's honor, Leucaspis and the Lycian fleet's commander, Orontes, who sailed from Troy together over the blustery seas until the South Wind overwhelmed them, swamping both ships and men with water.

6d Aeneas Meets with Palinurus, His Former Helmsman (337–383)

Suddenly, Aeneas saw his helmsman Palinurus drawing near. Just days before, he had fallen from the stern while observing the stars on their journey from Libya, sent sprawling amidst the swells of the sea. When Aeneas made out the dim figure of his gloomy comrade in the thick shadows, he addressed him, "What god was it, Palinurus, who stole you from us and drowned you in the middle of the sea? Come, tell us. Never before has Apollo been found deceitful, yet in this one oracle have I been misled: he prophesied that you would not be harmed on the sea and would make it to the land of Ausonia⁵—and this is how he keeps his word!"

Palinurus answered, "Phoebus' tripod did not mislead you, my leader, son of Anchises, nor was I drowned in the sea by a god. No, it was the rudder, my assigned post. I was holding on to it, guiding the ship's course, when it was wrenched off by some great force, and I fell with it headfirst overboard. I swear on the harsh seas that I did not fear for myself as much as for your ship, that, stripped of its controls and bereft of its pilot, it might falter amidst such mighty swells. For three stormy nights the South Wind tossed me violently across the vast open seas. On the fourth day, when the crest of a wave lifted me skyward, I could barely make out Italy in the distance. Gradually I paddled toward shore. Finally, I was on dry land and safe, I thought when the savage inhabitants, mistaking me for some worthy prey, swept down upon me with swords as I, weighed down in water-logged clothes, clutched at the jagged top of the headland crag with grasping hands. Now the surf holds me, and the winds buffet me on the shore. Therefore, I beg you, invincible spirit, by the sweet light and air of heaven, by your father, and by your son Iulus' bright future, save me from my evils! Either seek out Veli's port and toss some earth upon me—for you can—or if there is some way, if your divine mother shows you some way (and it is not, I think, without the gods' will that you intend to sail on these dreadful streams and the marshes of Styx), offer me, a pitiful soul, your right hand and take me along with you over the waters, so that at least in death I might find some peaceful resting place."

This much he had spoken when the prophetess broke in, "Whence did such a dreadful desire come upon you? Do you, though unburied, intend to behold the waters of Styx and the merciless stream of the Eumenides? Or to approach the bank unbidden? Give up your hopes that prayer can alter the gods' decrees. But take you these words to heart as solace for your hard trial: Neighboring peoples in cities far

⁴ Geryon.

⁵ Italy.

and wide will be driven by heaven-sent omens to appease your bones. They will build you a tomb, and at that tomb they will perform yearly rituals, and the place will forever bear Palinurus' name."⁶

Palinurus' cares were soothed by her words, and for a moment in time his sullen heart felt no pain, only joy at the hand that bears his name.

6e Aeneas and the Sibyl Present the Golden Bough and Cross the River (384-425)

They continued on their journey and approached the river. When the boatman caught sight of them from the Stygian marsh as they made their way through the silent grove and turned their steps to the riverside, he spoke first, upbraiding Aeneas with menacing words, "Whoever you are who approach our streams with sword drawn, stay where you are. Tell me why have you come. Come no further! This is the realm of shades, sleep, and drowsy night. It is forbidden to ferry living bodies upon my Stygian vessel. When Alcides came, I did not delight in taking him on board, or Theseus and Pirithous, although they were born of gods and were of indomitable strength. Hercules sought to put the guard of Tarranus in chains and dragged the trembling bear away from the throne of the king himself. The other two attempted to lead our queen out of Dis' bedchamber."

The Amphitryasian priestess gave this brief reply, "We bring no such tricks here—do not be alarmed—nor does his weapon bring violence. Let the massive warden of this realm forever terrify the bloodless shades by barking in his cave. Let Proserpina remain chaste and watch over her uncle's home. This is Trojan Aeneas, renowned for his devotion and valor, who has journeyed down into the deepest darkness of Erebus to find his father. And if the image of such devotion does not move you at all, then perhaps⁷—she took out the bough hidden in her dress—"you might recognize this bough."

And at that, the anger that swelled in Charon's heart subsided. No more was said. He gazed in wonder at the venerable gift, the fateful bough, now seen again after so long a time, and he turned and brought his dark-blue vessel to the shore. Then he shoved aside the other souls seated on the long benches and cleared the gangways to let great Aeneas onto the vessel. The boat, its planks roped together, groaned under the weight, and the craft let in a flood of marsh water through its cracks. At length Charon safely ferried both hero and seer across the river's expanse and unloaded them upon the formless mud and the drab reeds on the other side.

Massive Cerberus makes this realm resound with his three-throated barking. His monstrous frame lay in the cave before them. When the seer saw that the snakes upon his necks were already hissing and bristling, she threw him a cake drugged with honey and magical flour. Ravenous with hunger, Cerberus opened wide his three jaws and wolfed down the treat. His monstrous backside went limp, and he collapsed upon the ground, his hugeness extending across the whole cave. Aeneas raced through the entrance now that the guard was buried in sleep, escaping the bank of the river that allows no return.

6f Aeneas Enters Limbo (426-493)

Cries were heard immediately in the first area, great wailing, the souls of infants weeping, souls never tasting sweet life, snatched from their mothers' breasts, stolen by the black day of doom, buried in bitter death. Next were those condemned to death under false accusations, but their resting places were not allotted without a trial, without a judge. For the inquisitor Minos presides over the court. He controls the selection of judges, convenes the jury of silent dead, and learns of their lives and the charges against them. The next region was occupied by those guiltless but unhappy souls who brought death unto themselves by their own hand and in their loathing of the light drew away their lives on earth. How they would now choose to endure poverty and hard toil under the skies above! But immutable law stands in their way. The grim marsh, that hateful water, hems them in, and the nine winding circles of the Styx confine them.

Nor far from here, spreading as far as the eye can see, the Fields of Mourning—the name given to them in stories—came into view. Here, concealed in secret groves and hidden by a forest of myrtle, reside those consumed by the savage wasting caused by pitiless love. Their pangs of love do not leave them even in death. In these places Aeneas saw Phaedra, Procris, and gloomy Eriphyle, revealing the wounds inflicted by her hard-hearted son, as well as Eradine and Pasiphae. Beside them walked Laodamia, and the once made Caeneus, now a woman, returned by fate to her original form.

Among them was Phoenician Dido, wandering through the great forest, her wound still fresh. As soon as the Trojan hero stopped and made out her barely visible figure through the dim shadows—just like when a man either sees, or thinks he has seen, the moon rise through the clouds at the month's beginning—he released a flood of tears and spoke to her out of sweet love, "Ill-starred Dido, so the message that came to me was true after all, that you brought an end to your life with a sword. Alas, was I the cause of your death? I swear by the stars and the gods above, and by whatever faith resides in earth's depths, it was against my will, Queen, that I left your shores. It was the gods' orders—the same that now compel me to go through these shadows, these moldering, rough places, and the deep night—that drove me to do their bidding. I could not have fathomed that my departure would bring such great pain to you. Stop! Don't take yourself from my sight! Why are you running away? This is the final time the fates will allow me to address you."

With such words Aeneas tried to comfort the soul of the seething, glaring woman, and he began to weep. She turned away and kept her eyes fixed firmly on the ground, and as Aeneas spoke, her expression changed no more than if she were hard flint or the ragged cliffs of Marpeessus. At last she tore herself away, full of hate, and retreated to the shade-giving grove, where her former husband, Syphaeus, soothed her cares and requited her love. Shaken by her hard lot, Aeneas followed after her at a distance as she went, with tears in his eyes and pity in his heart.

From there he pressed on his appointed journey. Soon they reached the last of the fields, the secluded haunts of celebrated warriors. He first encountered Tydeus, then Parthenopaeus, renowned in war, and the pale ghost of Adrastus. He then met men much wept for among the living, the war-fallen, his fellow Dardanians. When he saw them all filling out in one long train, he gave out a deep groan, Glaucus, Medon, Thersilochus, Antenor's three sons, Ceres' priest Polyboetes, and Idaeus, who even in

⁶ The place is still known in Italy as Capo Palinuro.

death still held fast to his chariot and his war gear. The souls crowded around him on his left and right, and it was not enough just to see him once; they delighted in detaining him, walking alongside him, and learning the reasons why he had come. But when the leaders of the Danaans and Agamemnon's battalions saw the man and the flash of his weapons through the shadows, they quaked in great fear. Some ran away as they once had run for their ships; others tried to raise their war cry, a pitiful whimper, their shout cut short, mocking their gaping mouths.

Gg Aeneas Meets His Fellow Trojan Deiphobus (494–547)

Then he saw Priam's son Deiphobus, his whole body mutilated. His face was savagely cut up, his face and both hands, his ears torn from his ravaged head, and his nose lopped off to the nostrils, a dishonorable wound. Thus Aeneas barely recognized him as he covered and tried to cover up his grisly punishments. He went out of his way to address him in a familiar voice, "Valiant Deiphobus, descendant of great Teucer's bloodline! Who chose to exact their revenge in so cruel a fashion? Who could have created you like this? Word came to me that on Troy's final night you, with nothing left to give after your great slaughter of Pelasgians, fell dead atop the great tangled mountain of carnage. Then with my own hands I built an empty tomb on the Rhoecan shore, and I hailed your spirit three times in a great voice. There your name on stone and a tribute of arms mark the spot. I was unable, friend, to find you as I left and lay your bones to rest in our native land."

To these words Priam's son responded, "You, friend, have left nothing undone. You have performed every rite owed to Deiphobus, to the ghost of his corpse. No, it was my fate and the deadly crime of the Spartan woman that drowned me in these evils. It was she who left me these mementos. You know that we spent our last night amidst misguided happiness—it is all too deeply etched in our minds. When that fateful horse bounded up the lofty towers of Pergamum and produced armed infantry from its pregnant belly, that woman in a mock choral procession led Phrygian women around the city chanting "Enkora" in Bacchic frenzy. She herself stood in the middle and from the highest point in the city hoisted a huge torch above her, a beacon for the Danaans. Then, exhausted from toil and overpowered by sleep, I was held fast in an ill-omened bridal chamber, where I lay, subdued by a sweet deep stillness, very much like peaceful death.

"Meanwhile, that outstanding wife of mine took every weapon from my halls—she even slipped my trusty sword out from under my pillow! She then called Meneclaus into my house, opening up the doors for him in the hope, of course, that her actions would be a great peace-offering to her lover and that the infamy of her past ills would be erased. But why drag the story out? They burst into my bedroom together with that inciter of crimes, Aeolus' descendant, Ulysses. Gods, pay back the Greeks in kind if I demand these punishments with a pure mouth! But you, Aeneas, come, tell us in turn what has brought you here while you are still alive. Have you been driven here off-course in your wanderings over the sea? Were you directed by the gods? Or have you been dogged by such misfortune that you have come to these homes without sun, these dismal places?"

At this point of their conversation, Aurora upon her rosy chariot had already crossed the midpoint of her heavenly circuit, and they would have spent all the allotted time

talking like this, if Aeneas' companion, the Sibyl, had not admonished him tersely, "Night is falling, Aeneas, and we are drawing out the hours in tears. Here is the spot where the road forks. The right path leads down to the walls of mighty Dis. This is the one that will take us to Elysium. But the left path—that one leads the wicked to their punishments and sends them along to unholy Tartarus."

Deiphobus replied, "No need for wrath, great priestess. I will depart, take my proper place, retire to the shadows. Onward, glory of our race, onward! And may you enjoy a better fate." He spoke, and as he did, he turned and walked away.

6h The Sibyl Describes Tartarus (548–627)

Aeneas turned and suddenly saw, down beneath the cliff on the left, an extensive fortress encircled by three walls. Around it flowed a violent river, licking the walls with its scorching flames. Tartarean Phlegethon, tossing crashing boulders as it went. The massive gate faced them, a gate with pillars of solid adamantine, which neither mortal force nor the dwellers of heaven themselves could tear down in war. An iron turret towered above the rest, and Tisiphone, wrapped in her bloody robe, sat perched upon it, watching over the entryway sleeplessly, both night and day. From here you could hear groans, the lashes of brutal beatings, the screech of grating iron too, and chains being dragged. Aeneas stopped and took in the noises, terrified: "What kind of crimes are here? Please tell me, virgin priestess. What punishments cause their suffering? What is the reason for this terrible lamentation?"

The seer spoke, "Renowned leader of the Teucrians, no pure person is allowed to step through the Gateway of Wickedness. But when Hecate put me in charge of Avernus' sacred grove, she herself taught me the punishments that the gods dole out and took me through it all. This hard, brutal realm is under the dominion of Cossian Rhadamantus. He reprimands them, listens to their web of lies, and forces each to confess what sins they committed in the world above, thinking they had gained happiness with their hollow deceit, only to atone for it later in death. Upon the gully the Avenger Tisiphone, armed with a whip, immediately leaps down and lashes them, thrusting menacing snakes in their faces with her left hand and summoning her grim band of sisters. Finally, with a frightening grating sound, the Gates of the Damned swing open. You see what sort of guard looms over the courtyard, what grim shape watches over the doors—well, something even more savage resides inside, the monstrous Hydra, her fifty black jaws gaping wide. Behind her, Tartarus itself falls off sharply, plunging deep beneath the shadows of the underworld twice as far as the distance of a man's gaze heavenward into aetheral Olympus. Here dwells the ancient brood of Earth, the band of Titans, cast down by the thunderbolt's blast, wallowing in the deep abyss.

"Here too I saw the twin sons of Aloeus, monstrous bodies, who tried to tear down mighty heaven with their bare hands and topple Jupiter from his lofty throne. I also saw Salmoneus suffering cruel punishments, retribution for his sins, as he mimicked Jupiter's flames and Olympus' rumblings. Through the peoples of Greece, through the city in the heart of Elis, he rode upon a four-horse chariot, brandishing a torch, exulting and demanding to be honored like a god—lunatic, mimicking the storms and inimicable thunder with bronze and the galloping of hooved horses! The almighty Father from the dense cloud cover hurled his missile—no firebrand or

smoky pine-branch this—and threw him head over heels in a mighty whirlwind. There too Tityos, the nursing of all-creating Earth, could be seen, his body lying outstretched over six entire acres. A monstrous vulture, its hooked beak plucking out his immortal liver and intestines, fertile for punishment, probes for its feast and lives deep inside his chest, and there is no rest for his organs ever renewed. Why should I tell of the Lapiths, Ixion and Pirithous, over whom hangs a dark boulder, always on the verge of falling, appearing as if it were? The golden frames of the festal couch gleam, and a sumptuous banquet prepared in royal style is set out before them. But the eldest of the Furies crouches nearby and prevents the meal from being touched. She rears up, holding her torch up high, and booms in a thunderous voice.

“Here too reside those who in life hated their brothers, beat a parent, or cheated a dependent; those who stingily guarded the riches they acquired and refused to set aside a share for their families (this group of sinners is enormous). Then there are adulterers cut down for their crimes, generals who prosecuted wars against their country, and men who felt no shame in breaking the promises they made to their masters, jailed, they await their punishment. Do not ask what punishment they face or what sort of fashion or fortune has buried these men in ruin. Some roll huge rocks. Others hang suspended, bound spread-eagle on the spokes of wheels. Ill-starred Thesus sits eternally anchored to his seat. Phlegyas in the depths of woe issues his warning to all. He spreads his message through the shadows with his loud voice: Learn righteousness—be you warned—and do not scorn the gods! Another sold out his country for gold and installed a powerful master; for a price he enacted laws, and for a price he annulled them. Then there is the one who violated his daughter’s bedchamber, engaging in forbidden nuptials. All dared monstrous crimes, all accomplished what they dared. I could not, even if I had one hundred tongues, one hundred mouths, and a voice of iron, recount every form of crime or name every punishment.”

6i Aeneas Enters the Blessed Groves (628–678)

When the venerable priestess of Phoebus finished her account, she said, “But come now, push on and complete the mission you have undertaken. We must move faster. I can see the walls forged in the Cyclopes’ forges and the gates in the archway before us. This is where we have been directed to place this gift as an offering.”

She had spoken. Going side by side through the dark ways, they hurried across the intervening space and approached the doors. Aeneas quickly took up position at the entrance and sprinkled his body with fresh water. Then he planted the bough in the doorway before him. With this done at last, his duty to the goddess fulfilled, they came to the lush lands, the charming greenery of the Blessed Groves, blissful resting places. Here a loftier expanse of air embraced the fields and clothed them in a brilliant light. They enjoy their own sun, their own stars. Some were exercising in the grassy yards, competing in sport or wrestling on golden sand. Others were pounding the earth with their feet in dance as they sang. There too the Thracian priest, dressed in a long robe, accompanied their rhythms with seven notes, playing the same notes now with his fingers, now with his ivory pick. Here lay the ancient race of Teneas, a most beautiful brood, great-hearted heroes born in a better age. Thus,

⁷ Orpheus.

Assaracus, and Dardanus, the founder of Troy. Aeneas admired the men’s weapons and their empty chariots. Spears stood fixed in the ground, and their teams, unharmed, grazed here and there over the fields. The same joy they took from their arms and chariots while they were alive, the same care they took in pasturing their sleek steeds, followed them to their resting places beneath the earth.

Suddenly he saw others picnicking in the grass on his right and left, and still others singing in unison a festive psalm to Apollo in a grove fragrant with laurel. From here the flow of the Eridanus, at its most powerful, streams through the forest on its way to the world above. Assembled here were those who suffered wounds while fighting for their country; priestess who remained pure in life, pious poets with eloquence worthy of Phoebus, those who improved life by discovering new knowledge, and those who by their service to others made themselves unforgettable. The brows of all were wreathed in a crown of snow-white wool. When they had gathered around, the Sibyl addressed them all, directing her words to Museus most of all since he was surrounded by a great throng and stood head and shoulders above the rest, “Tell me, blessed souls, and you, noble prophet, in what place, in what region is Anchises? It is for him that we have come and sailed across the mighty streams of Erebus.”

The hero gave his brief response to her, “No one here has a fixed home. We live in shady groves and rest upon soft riverbanks and meadows watered by rivulets. But if your heart is bent on finding him, climb over this ridge, and before long I shall set you upon a path that is easy.” After he spoke, he went before them as guide and from the ridge showed them the shimmering fields down below them. Then they descended, leaving the mountaintops behind them.

6j Aeneas Meets His Father (679–755)

Father Anchises was in a deep, lush valley of green, surveying with careful consideration the souls kept there awaiting their journey to the light above. By chance he was reviewing the full roster of his own family, his beloved descendants, their fates and fortunes, their dispositions and deeds. When he saw Aeneas drawing across the fields toward him, he eagerly stretched out both hands, tears drenching his cheeks, and let out a cry, “Have you come at last? Has your devotion to your father, long awaited, overcome this hard journey? Can it be that I am allowed to gaze upon your face, Son, to hear your familiar voice and respond to it in kind? This is how I kept thinking it would turn out, how I reckoned it would be as I counseled off the days, and my anxious concern was not deceived. What lands you must have crossed, what seas you must have sailed to greet me! How great must the dangers have been that tormented you, Son! How I feared that Libya’s kingdom might bring you harm!”

Aeneas answered, “It was your image, Father, your sad image, so often seen, that drove me to follow this course. My fleet stands anchored on the Tyrrhenian Sea. Let me clasp your right hand, Father, please, and do not draw back from my embrace.” As he spoke, a wide flow of tears streamed down his cheeks. Three times he tried to put his arms around his father’s neck; three times the ghost, embraced in vain, slipped through his hands like weightless breezes and winged sleep.

Now Aeneas saw a secluded grove in a withdrawn hollow where the forest’s branches were rustling and the river Lete lazily drifted past peaceful abodes. Along this river countless faces, countless peoples fluttered, as when bees in the meadows

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on a clear summer's day alight upon the myriad of colorful flowers and swarm about the white lilies, and the whole field is abuzz with humming. Startled by this sudden sight, Aeneas asked his father the reasons for it, for he did not know the stream in the distance or the men who had swarmed to the banks in such a multitude.

Then father Anchises answered, "The souls that by fate's decree are owed another ^{poor wretched} body, here, at the bank of the river Lethe, drink its care-releasing waters, the deep erasures of the mind. These souls I have long wanted to tell you about, to show them to you face to face, to relate to you the descendants of my family, so that you might better rejoice with me now that you have found Italy."

"Father," said Aeneas, "am I really to think that some exalted souls leave here to go into the world above and return to sluggish bodies? What dread desire of the light do these poor souls feel?"

"I will tell you, Son. I will not keep you in suspense," Anchises responded and revealed each detail in order. "First, heaven and earth, the fluid fields of the sea, the shining orb of the moon, and the Titan sun are nourished by a spirit within them, and an intelligence permeating the parts drives the whole mass and mingles with the great body of the universe. From this mingling are born the races of men and beasts, the lives of flying creatures, and all the monsters the sea holds beneath its marble surface. Their seeds have a fiery force, and their origin is divine, but harmful bodies blunt their powers—their earthly frame, their drying limbs dull them. From this come fear and desire, pain and pleasure, and they do not perceive the pure air of heaven because they are imprisoned in the blinding darkness of their dungeons. Yes, and even when life has left them on their final day, they are not liberated from every defect, every bodily scourge—the many defects are so long attached that they by necessity become deeply and mysteriously infused into their very being. So they are purged by punishment, paying the penalty for their old evils: some are suspended and exposed to the weightless winds; for others the guilty stain is leached out beneath a mighty deluge or burned away by fire. Each of us endures our own afterlife. Then we are sent through the wide expanse of Elysium. A few of us live here in the Blessed Groves until the circuit of the ages is complete and the long passage of time has cleansed that ingrained pollution from our souls and left behind only the pure ethical consciousness and fiery spirit unscathed. But all of these souls, when they have turned the wheel over a thousand years, are summoned by the god to the stream of Lethe in mighty throngs, so that, you see, without memory they will visit the dome of the upper world again and want to return to flesh." >

FROM GEORGICS

4.453–4.527 Orpheus in the Underworld

The Georgics, a four-book poem on agricultural life, ends with the beautiful but heartbreaking story of Orpheus and Eurydice. Vergil's account describes the complete story of these two unfortunate lovers, but the dramatic highpoint is the description of Orpheus' loss of his beloved wife for the second and final time as he tries to lead her back from the underworld. The story is told by Proetus, a prophetic sea god, to Aristaeus, a rustic beekeeper

who has lost all of his bees and is at a loss as to why. The reason is, of course, that it was his pursuit of Eurydice that caused her death, and now Orpheus is gaining revenge for his transgression.

Indeed, it is the wrath of a great spirit that torments you; grievous are the sins you are atoning for. Orpheus, that pitiable soul, who suffers unjustly, sees these punishments on you, should the Fates not oppose, and rages passionately for his wife. Yes, while running headlong along the river to escape from you, that girl destined for death did not see the monstrous serpent before her feet, lurking by the riverbank in the deep grass. A band of Dryads, her companions, filled the mountaintops with their cries: the peaks of Rhodope wailed, as did lofty Pangaea. Rhesus' land sacred to Mars, the Getae, the river Hebrus, and Athenian Oritryia.⁸ But Orpheus, soothing his aching love with his hollow tortoiseshell, sang of you, his sweet wife, you as he sat alone on the desolate shore, you as the day arrived, you as the day departed.

He even entered the jaws of Taenarum, the deep doorway of Dis, and the grove shrouded in black terror. He dared to approach the spirits of the dead, the terrifying king, hearts that know not how to be softened by human prayers. Yet, moved by his song, the insubstantial shades and the ghosts of those deprived of light came from the deepest region of Erebus, like many thousands of birds taking cover in the woods when evening or the winter rains drive them down from the mountains: mothers and husbands, bodies of great-hearted heroes robbed of life, young boys and unmarried girls, men in the prime of their lives placed on pyres before their parents' eyes—those whom the black mire and mucky reeds of Cocytus and the hateful marsh with its sloughy waters hem in and the nine winding circles of the Styx confine. Even the very halls, the innermost depths of Death, and the Eumenides with bluish snakes entwined in their hair were entranced. Cerberus held his three jaws agape, and the wheel that spun Ixion ceased to turn with the wind.

At last he had overcome all obstacles and was making his way back. Eurydice, now returned to him, was nearing the air above, following behind her husband (for this was the condition Proserpina had set), when her unsuspecting lover was seized by a sudden madness, a forgivable one to be sure, if only the spirits of the dead knew how to forgive. Orpheus stopped just short of the light itself and, (alas!) forgetful, his will overcome, looked back at Eurydice, who was his own again. Right then all his hard toil was wasted, his compact with the pitiless tyrant broken. Three times thunder reverberated throughout the pools of Avernus. She spoke, "What madness, Orpheus, what awful madness has destroyed my miserable life and yours? Behold, a second time the cruel Fates call me back, and sleep falls over my swimming eyes. And now, farewell. I am swept away, shrouded by deep night, stretching out to you—though, alas, I am no longer yours—these helpless hands."

She spoke, and suddenly she slipped away from his sight like smoke dissipating into thin air, and she did not see him thereafter as he grasped at the shadows in vain,

⁸ All of these names are geographical markers related to Thrace, the land sacred to Mars from which Orpheus hailed: Rhesus was the famous Thracian ally of the Trojans; Rhodope is a mountain range; the Getae dwelled along the lower Danube; the Hebrus River runs through Thrace; and Oritryia, the daughter of the Athenian king, Erichonius, was married to Boreas, the North Wind who dwelled in Thrace.