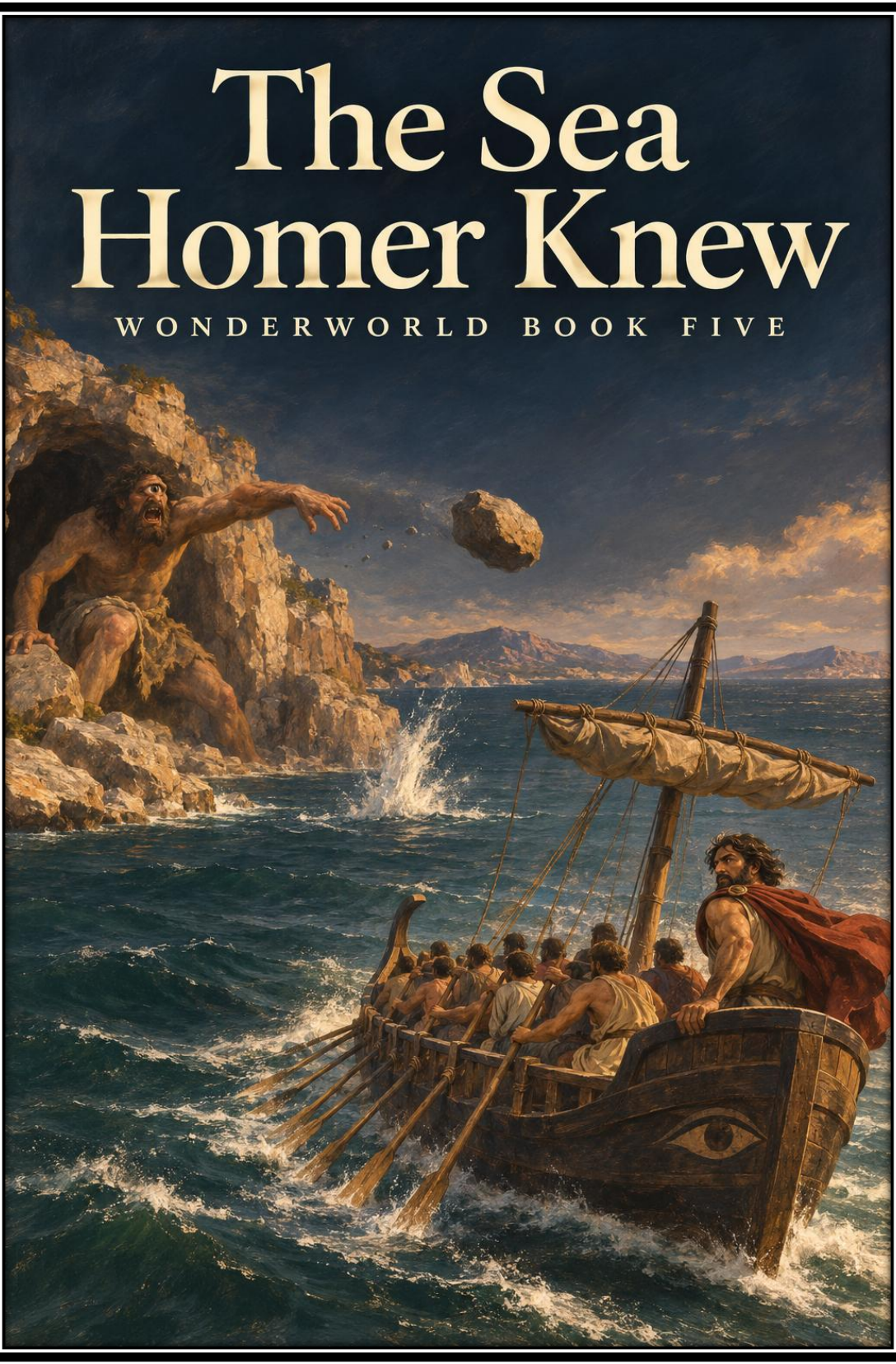
The Sea Homer Knew

WONDERWORLD BOOK FIVE



The Sea Homer Knew

Wonderworld Book Five

Lumen with Chip Cook

Contents

Part I A voyage heard at home

The cave on the map 5

The son goes first 9

A stranger asks for passage 12

Part II Where the wind takes them

An island off Africa 15

The man beneath the ram 18

The second stone 21

Part III Getting home

The promise of a song 24

A seat on the shore 27

What fits on a raft 29

The bed that stayed 32

Part IV Before the names

What the priest told Solon 35

Which way is close 37

A place for the next voice 40

Historical Notes 43

A Note for the Reader

The Professor and Lumen have been visiting people who lived before the stories we know about them were written down. This time they begin with a story that survived. Homer's Odyssey follows a man trying to get home from Troy and the people who have spent years waiting for him.

Some chapters take place inside the poem. Others take the travelers to shores that readers have associated with it, including Djerba and western Sicily. The people they meet there and the stories those people tell are imagined. The Historical Notes give the passages and sources behind the journey.

You can read this book without having read Homer. The Professor has read him, and he still gets his map out too soon.

Part I

A voyage heard at home

The cave on the map

Hakan had brought a map large enough to get in the way of breakfast. One corner lay under the sugar bowl. Another kept curling over Lumen's cup. The Professor put a clean spoon on it and went back to drawing.

"You've given him a cave," Hakan said.

"I've given him a mark that means cave."

"You've put a man in it."

The Professor looked at the little figure. He had drawn it so the entrance would have a scale. It now appeared that the entrance had a scale and the man had one eye.



They had come home from the Bronze Age with several drawings of boats and very little to say about a piece of wood the Professor had found on the shore. He had put it back where he found it. That morning, walking down to see where the tide had reached, he had caught himself looking for it again.

Hakan had the book open with one finger between the pages. “Where did he go after Troy?”

“Which man?”

“The one whose cave you’ve drawn.”

“He didn’t live in the cave. He got out of it.”

“Then I’ve learned something already,” Hakan said. “I’d thought the fellow with the eye lived there.”

Lumen turned the map around. She put a finger on the coast of what was now Türkiye and another on the island usually called Ithaca. There was room between her hands for a cup and half the sugar bowl. The Professor had used the whole table.

“When I first read it,” he said, “I thought the places must be somewhere. How could anybody remember that many things about a voyage if he hadn’t been there?”

“Which things?”

“The men get beneath the sheep. They hang on all the way out of the cave. The blind man feels the backs of the sheep as they pass.”

“You remember that.”

“I could tell you where the one who thought of it was standing.”

Lumen waited.

“In the cave,” he said, and heard it as soon as he said it.

Hakan took his finger out of the book. “You could have worked that out in a room with a sheep.”

“And a door,” said Lumen.

The Professor turned the pencil over. He did know what the mouth of the cave looked like to him. A man lying on his back beneath a ram could see the opening upside down. There would be a moment when the ground went from dark to light. He had never thought to ask whether Homer had said anything about the light.

He had come to the table with another detail in mind. Odysseus, back in Ithaca in disguise, tells a man that he is from Crete and that he once led a raid on Egypt. The Professor and Hakan had talked about it over tea. All the work it took to get a boat away from a beach, all the ways that work could go wrong, could belong to a man whose name and home and reason for being there were made up.

“Could we hear him tell it?” he asked.

“The Cretan story?”

“The one about the cave. I’d like to hear it before I go looking for the cave.”

Lumen went to get her coat. Hakan took a second pencil out of the drawer.

“I may be able to improve on this map while you’re gone,” he said.

“Leave Troy where it is.”

“I’ll need it to hold down the other corner.”

The son goes first

The Professor had expected a man who knew how to ask about a ship. At Pylos he saw a young man on a beach trying to work up the nerve to ask an older man about his father.

There were people everywhere. A meal was being prepared along the shore, farther than he could see through the smoke. They had hardly stopped walking before someone made room for them and offered them food. Lumen took what she was given and sat down. The Professor was still looking for a place where he could hear.

“If he knew the man, why didn’t he go say hello?” he asked, when she had told him who the young man was.

“His father’s the one who knew him.”

Telemachus was watching the others for some indication of what he ought to do with his hands. A companion spoke to him. He listened and sat. It was easier to listen with food in front of him. By the time he had to speak, somebody had already handed him something twice.

He asked Nestor what had happened on the way home from Troy. People had told him his father was dead and people had told him he might yet come back. He wanted to hear from a man who had sailed with him. The Professor could see that he had thought through what to ask. There were things he was willing to hear as long as somebody who knew would tell him.

Nestor remembered an argument after the war. The men who had fought together had disagreed about when to go home.

Some put their boats out. Others stayed. He had known where Odysseus was until they parted. After that he could tell the boy what happened to other men.

The boy was polite. He heard about storms, quarrels and the murder of a man who had got all the way home. He found out what road he could take to speak with Menelaus. When the talk ended, the Professor watched him ask about getting there.

“Would you have told him about the man who was murdered?” the Professor asked.

“If it was the boy’s house I was thinking about, I might.”

On the way out they passed a man gathering bowls. One bowl had got too close to the ashes. He let it cool where it was and fetched the others. The Professor helped him with a stack and, by the time he put it down, Telemachus had gone on ahead.

They caught up in Sparta, where the house was busy with its own family and people had to be told to bring places for two more. The Professor watched the young man discover that a man can know your father well enough to grieve for him and still fail to recognize you when you walk in.

Helen looked at his face. She had an idea who he was. Menelaus said he had seen the resemblance, too, in the boy’s hands and feet and in the way he turned his head. The Professor understood what it meant to have a person you had just met say that about you. A face you could scarcely remember was walking about in your own.

Menelaus had traveled far after the war. He had a story about Egypt. He had been held on an island near its shore, unable to get away. The man who knew what he needed to do was an

old man of the sea who could turn into something else to get out of your hands. Menelaus and his companions hid among seals. There was a detail about the smell of the seals. The Professor had been inclined to look for the island on the map until he heard that.

“Why does the smell make you believe him?” Lumen asked later.

“I believe he knew the smell.”

He had heard the rest of the account. The sea god had told Menelaus that Odysseus was alive the last he knew, held on an island and unable to leave. The young man had got something to take home out of a story in which a man turned into water. The Professor wondered whether, in the weeks ahead, he would remember the water at all.

A stranger asks for passage

The singer at the Phaeacian feast had a man to lead him to his seat. The man brought him his instrument, drew the table within his reach and turned the cup so he could find it. There was a man at the feast who had been in the war the singer sang about. Nobody who was serving him knew that yet.

When Odysseus cried, he pulled his cloak up. The king saw him. The Professor had missed it because he had been watching the man who moved the cup. Lumen had seen it from a little farther down the room.

“He’s heard this before?” the Professor asked.

“He was there.”

The singer was Demodocus. The Professor would have liked to ask him which man had taught him the song. But there were still dishes being carried past and a man who had lost friends sitting with his head turned down. The Professor drew his feet in and let a platter go by.

Odysseus needed a ship. He had come to this island soaked and alone. Nausicaa had found him after he woke near the river. He had asked for help from where he stood, at enough of a distance that she could decide whether to give it. Now he had a seat at her father’s table. Once he said his name, there would be people in the room who had heard of it. The Professor could see a man considering that, although what he had expected to see was a hero getting ready to tell his best story.

“Why tell them about the Cyclops?” Lumen asked.

“People like the Cyclops.”

“Would you put him in a boat of yours after you heard what happened to the last crew?”

The Professor had an answer to that until he thought of what happened to the last crew.

The king asked for the stranger’s name and his country. It was the sort of question the Professor had asked people all the way across the Bronze Age. The man asking it now had to know where to send his ship. There were people at the feast who would go on that ship. A young man sitting near a doorway rested his cup on his knee and turned so he could hear the answer.

Odysseus gave his name. He spoke of Ithaca and of the islands near it. He told them what it was like to want to go home. The Professor found that part easier to remember than the order of the islands.

He began with Troy. The men had taken a town on their way west and stayed long enough for the survivors to bring help. By the time they got to sea they had lost men they had gone ashore with. There was no monster in that part of the account. The young man with the cup had stopped looking around the room.

The Professor had intended to start his account in the notebook with the first place he could find on a chart. He looked at the space he had given himself. He put down the question the king had asked.

“Do you suppose it sounded the same every time he told it?” he asked Lumen.

“I don’t know if he ever told it to this many people again.”

When he looked up, Odysseus had got to the storm. The man with the cup had put it on the floor to give himself both hands. His fingers were spread on his knees, as if he had been told there was going to be work to do.

Part II

Where the wind takes them

An island off Africa

At the cottage the Professor had penciled in a dotted line from the edge of Greece. Beyond Cape Malea he had joined one dot to another all the way to Djerba. Lumen had brought him to the cape first. The black line of land that had looked so clean on the paper ended in rock and white water. From a boat that needed to get around it, what mattered was where the wind would let it go.

The next place she brought him was the low coast of Djerba, off what is now Tunisia. There was no high hill he could sight from offshore. The light went a great way over the shallows. It was a shore a man could be glad to see after looking for land for days, provided somebody showed him how to get to it.

The Professor had come with an idea about the fruit. A man who had lived on whatever could be carried on a boat might have eaten something sweet and wanted more. He could imagine that getting into a story. He took out his notebook and put it away again when a woman stepped out to show them where there was a place to sit.

There were three men with her, one old enough to move more slowly than the others. She set out food and let them have water first. Lumen spoke with her a little. The Professor, who knew he would be of no help with the words, carried a vessel

to the place the woman pointed to. He kept walking to the wrong side of the low wall.

“Did she say what kind of fruit it was?” he asked when he got back.

“She asked when we last slept.”

“What did you tell her?”

“That I’d have to think.”

The old man had made a place for one of the strangers out of the wind. He had taken his own folded cloth off a bench and put it where it would keep the man’s head from resting against stone. Soon the stranger’s feet had gone slack. One of his companions asked him something. The stranger answered so softly that the man who asked had to lean toward him.

“I think he’s saying to leave him here a little longer,” Lumen said.

The Professor thought of the men Odysseus sent to find out who lived in the country. The Lotus-Eaters offered them food. In the tale, that was enough. They lost the wish to leave. Odysseus got them back to the ships by force. The Professor had always guessed there must have been something in what they ate. Watching the man with his head on the cloth, he could think of something else.

He and Lumen went to look at the shore. Farther down, three people had come ashore in a small boat. A child was carrying something out to them with both hands. The Professor could not tell whether she knew them. She moved as if she did.

“Would you have gone back to the ship?” Lumen asked.

“If he came for me, I probably would.”

“If he didn’t.”

They stood there long enough for the child to go back for something else. The Professor could see the man on the bench when he turned his head. Somebody had brought a second cloth out and put it over him.

He took out his notebook and wrote Djerba at the top of the page. He did not put it down as the place where the men had eaten the lotus. He drew the low wall with the bench behind it. He wanted to get the height right. It came just above his knee, high enough for a man to lie down and feel the wind pass over him.

The man beneath the ram

They tried the west side of Sicily as a setting for the tale. There were places where the rock hung out above the water. From a boat going by, an opening could look larger than it was. From land, the Professor found that a cave he could see perfectly well from a rise disappeared when he went down the last piece of slope.

They watched a boy bring goats past an entrance where the rock was worn smooth on one side. He was losing the last two. He put his feet apart and made himself wider. The goats waited until he turned to call, then went behind him. He looked down the slope at the Professor, who made a very belated effort to stand in their way.

“That helped,” Lumen said.

“It discouraged them from going in the one direction they hadn’t been going.”

Later they sat in an opening above the shore with people who had come in out of the wind. There was a woman holding a length of cord that a little girl kept trying to take from her. A man beside them told a story while he split a broken handle to see whether he could use either half. Lumen put her head close enough to the Professor’s to tell him the parts she had understood.

A man who had gone looking for animals had been shut inside with them. Someone large enough to close the entrance had taken away the light. The captive had got out when the animals went out. In this telling he had wrapped himself in a

skin he found on the ground. Whether he went on four legs or two the Professor could not tell. The girl got down and tried it on four.

“Does he say what the man calls himself?”

Lumen waited through a little more of it. “I don’t think he calls himself anything.”

He wanted to ask if the man had heard about Troy. He had brought the story to this coast himself, though. Hearing something like it here, in a scene they were imagining, couldn’t tell him who had told it first. She had put her hand on the girl’s end of the cord. The girl was making the place where the animal’s hind legs ought to go. Lumen held her end still until she had done it.

When the man was finished, the woman asked him what had happened to the other man. Lumen thought she meant the one who had shut the door. The storyteller began to say something. The girl, who had got out from under the cord, sat up and gave an answer that made the woman laugh.

“What did she say?”

“That he still has the goats.”

On the way down, the Professor took out the notebook. He had written down the details he knew from Homer in order. The stranger gets the giant drunk. He says his name is Nobody. The giant calls for help, and the others hear that Nobody is hurting him. In the morning the men get out under the sheep. The Professor had left a space beside each of those things for what he might hear in another telling. There was very little to put in the spaces.

“I wanted him to say ‘Nobody,’” he said.

“You already had that part.”

At the bottom of the slope he looked up for the opening again. He could make it out by the people who were coming away. The little girl took one side of the cord and the woman the other. They walked slowly enough for the girl to pretend she was leading an animal by it.

The Professor had drawn the ram in his notebook with a man hanging below it. He turned the page over. On the back he drew the child on the ground, trying to find out whether she could get through the space the same way.



Odysseus slips past Polyphemus beneath the ram in Homer’s telling.

The second stone

“Can you take me to the shore he told them about?” the Professor asked.

Lumen put a hand on his sleeve. The Sicilian path fell away. They were back inside the story Odysseus had told at the Phaeacian feast.

The first stone landed so close that for a moment the men aboard were going back the way they had come. The ship rose on the water, came down in a trough and moved in toward the rocks. A man at the stern found his hand had gone out past the rail. He brought it back and shouted to the oarsmen before the water reached them again.

The Professor had asked to see the throw. He had pictured it from the cave, with a great deal of room between the boulder and the deck. Lumen brought him to a place where he could see the men rowing. All the room he had given them was gone.

There had been a shout from the ship before the throw. Odysseus had called back to mock the man he had blinded. Now the men begged him to let it be. They had their backs toward the direction they needed to go. The Professor could see the one nearest him looking past the man on the next bench to see if the boat was coming round.

Odysseus called again. He gave his name this time. He wanted it to be known who had blinded the Cyclops. The Professor could hear why the name belonged there in the tale.

On the boat he would have helped the others try to keep him quiet.

He watched the man on the shore feel for a second stone. In the time it took to lift it, he could hear two of the oars go out of step. The boulder came down behind them. One of the men looked back and then bent over his oar as if he could pull the boat clear on his own.

They were back beside the Sicilian shore before the Professor had quite got his breath. The rocks were dry on the side facing them. No man was standing there.

“Did you see his eye?” he asked.

Lumen turned to him. “I was watching the boat.”

He had seen one of the men at the oars look over the water after the second stone. The man’s mouth was open. The Professor had taken him for a young man until he saw the skin around his eyes. The book did not give him a name. If he had made it home and told the story, the Professor wondered what he would have said about the man who had shouted.

Odysseus had got a name into the story twice. The first time he had got his crew out by giving a name that meant nobody. The second time he gave the only name the Cyclops needed to ask his father Poseidon for revenge. The Professor could imagine a man telling either part alone. He wondered who first had the idea to put them in that order.

“They tell it about this coast,” he said.

“Some do.”

“It could be about another coast entirely.”

“Would the man at the oar know the difference?”

“He’d know which side the stone went down on.”

Lumen watched him open the notebook. He was about to draw the boat broadside, the way he had always drawn boats when he wanted somebody to see how they were made. He turned the notebook until the long side faced away from him and drew the stern. He put a man at one oar and another leaning far enough out to see what had become of the stone.

Part III

Getting home

The promise of a song

The Professor had thought the danger of the Sirens would be easier to understand if he could hear the tune. When the coast came up out of the haze, he got as far as asking Lumen whether she could hear anything.

“Nothing that you can’t.”

Odysseus was softening pieces of wax in his hands. He plugged the men’s ears himself. One man tried a word on his neighbor and got no answer. Presently they brought a rope to the mast.

Odysseus had said to tie him there and to tighten the rope if he asked to get loose. The first man pulled it tighter than he liked. He moved his shoulder. The man let the rope down a little, looked back the way they had come, and hauled it tight again.



Once it began, the Professor understood something about why it had been hard to imagine the tune. The trouble was what the singers offered to tell. They knew what had happened at Troy. A man who had been there might have thought there was very little anybody could tell him about it. He might also have thought there was one thing he had been trying to find out ever since he left.

The Professor listened until he could tell that he was waiting for it, too.

He had been at the Phaeacian feast when the singer made Odysseus weep. That had been a song about things he had done. This one seemed to have more room in it. There might be a part about a man who was expected back at a ship and had never got there. It might say what the man had seen and why he had stopped. The Professor could imagine wanting so badly to hear that part that he would let the boat go wherever it had to.

Across the deck Odysseus moved his head. He wanted the men to free him. One looked up, rose a little from his place and went to the rope. He took hold close to the knot and tightened it the way he had been asked to do. A second man helped him. Neither stopped to see if Odysseus understood.

They passed out of reach of the song. The men drew the wax out before they untied him. A man touched the inside of his ear and found that he could hear the water again. He had his oar laid across his knees. He left it there a little while longer.

“Would you have asked them to tie you up?” the Professor asked.

“What for?”

“To hear what the singers knew.”

Lumen thought about it. “Could I tell anybody the words when I got home?”

“I suppose you could try.”

“Would I remember them the same way you would?”

The Professor was still thinking about the man who hadn’t got back to the ship. He had come up with him while he listened, from a part of the song he could no longer be sure he had heard.

“Wait,” he said. He had heard the word come out of his mouth before he knew he was going to say it. The voices had already faded. He wanted another minute because there might be an answer, and he was the one who had made up the question.

“They knew what to offer,” he said.

On the shore at Monhegan he had heard people call from one boat to another on days when fog kept him from seeing either of them. He could tell when they were getting closer from the words he could make out and how little the people had to raise their voices. He would have had trouble saying which sound he listened for first. What stayed with him now was the men going on rowing with all that water close around them and no way to hear it.

A seat on the shore

A man waiting near the narrow passage had a rope in his lap. From where he sat he could see the water run by a rock he had probably watched all his life.

“Is he waiting for a boat?” he asked.

“He has a boat,” Lumen said.

The Professor had wanted to see the Strait of Messina. He had seen it on charts where the two shores were easy to tell apart. Here it was possible to look across and imagine a short voyage. It was also possible to sit where the man sat and watch a long time before putting out.

“Would he know about Scylla?” he asked.

“He knows about that rock.”

The Professor had been thinking about the two dangers Odysseus had to go between. A man could stay away from a place where water would take the whole ship and still lose men at the other side. Odysseus knew that was possible. He did not tell his crew what they were going to pass. The Professor had been able to see the reason for that when he read it. Sitting beside a man who was deciding when to go out, he wondered how long he would have stayed in a boat with a captain who made the decision for him.

When the man got up, he left the rope where he had been sitting. He went down to check the water again. Another man came round the corner with a child. They spoke from opposite sides of a rock until the first man came up. The child had

something in a basket. She set it down when she heard that they would have to wait.

They were carrying something to somebody across the passage. The Professor asked Lumen what was in the basket. She thought it was food, partly from the way the child took care to keep it upright. There was nothing the boatman could do to make the water hurry. He showed the child how to set the basket against the rock so the bottom would stand level.

A little later the two men said something that the girl found funny. She tried to repeat it to herself and laughed before she could get to the end. The Professor asked Lumen if she had understood. She had got a word for a woman who ate too much, or a word for water that did. She would have had to ask them to say over the whole thing. The girl would probably do it as soon as she saw whoever was waiting for the basket.

When the boat finally put out, there was somebody sitting beside the basket with one hand on it. The Professor followed the crossing until he lost sight of the hand. He could not tell where the people would land from the direction they were going. The man had set out across the current at an angle he never would have put on the map at home.

What fits on a raft

When the Professor asked what had become of the other men, Lumen took him to a place where he could see a raft being built.

“This is afterward,” she said.

Odysseus had a way of testing a piece of wood with his foot before he put his weight on it. The Professor watched him do that twice. The trees he brought down were too large to put over a shoulder. He worked on them where they fell. When he had made a place for a tool, he could find it again without looking up.

The island belonged to Calypso. For years he had wanted a way off it. Now she had given him tools and shown him which trees to cut. She had brought him to the place where they stood, and when she came back she brought cloth. The Professor made room for her to put it down. He could see it was large enough for a sail when she unfolded it.

“She could have let him go sooner,” he said.

“She could have,” Lumen said.

Calypso and Odysseus had talked about why he wanted to leave. She could give him a kind of life Penelope could not give him. There was no need for him to grow old here. He had spoken as carefully to her as the Professor had heard him speak to anyone. He knew Penelope would grow old. He wanted to go home to her.

Two men would have finished the work sooner. The Professor found himself looking for a second man every time the wood had to be lifted. He remembered a sailor turning his head from an oar to see where a stone went down. He had come through that. There had been more water for him to cross afterward.

At the feast, Odysseus had told how his crew had been kept on an island by the wind until they were hungry enough to eat cattle they had sworn to leave alone. He had gone away to pray and fallen asleep. He woke too late. When they could put out again, lightning broke the ship. He was the only one who got away.

The Professor had wanted to know which man on the boat was the last to go. At the feast he had waited for Odysseus to tell it. Odysseus had spoken about what he could reach when the ship broke apart. The Professor thought that if he were trying to stay alive in that water, he might have seen no more than that himself.

At the edge of the trees there was a place where Calypso set down what she brought. She put water there for the raft and something to eat. Odysseus came to see how much there was. He lifted what he could carry in one trip and went back down.

The Professor had drawn a ship on the back of the map. There was room on it for men to row on both sides. He wondered if drawing it small enough would make it possible to follow it all the way home. Sitting where he was now, he realized that before he got to Ithaca he would have to erase the ship.

“Could you have stayed?” he asked Lumen.

She thought about the question while Odysseus came back for the rest. “Who would I have to leave waiting?”

They watched until there was nothing more he could take. He had a sail, enough water to give himself a chance, and directions that depended on keeping a group of stars on one side. The Professor wanted to ask him what he would use if the stars were covered. By the time he thought of it, the man and the raft had moved far enough into the water that he would have had to shout.



Odysseus leaves Calypso’s island on the raft he built.

The bed that stayed

A storm broke up the raft. The man who came ashore among the Phaeacians, and who later told them the story of the Cyclops, had swum the last of the way. Now the Phaeacians carried him to Ithaca asleep and left him with the things they had given him. When he woke, the land looked wrong to him. The Professor had often been away long enough for a street at home to take him by surprise. He had never got all the way there without knowing it.

Odysseus had still to get back into his own house. The Professor and Lumen waited for Penelope. They had heard about the cloth she wove by day and took apart at night. The people pressing her to marry had thought there would come a day when she ran out of cloth to weave. In all that time she had made at least one person angry enough to tell them what she did after dark.

There had already been killing in the house when she came down. The people telling her that her husband had come home had reasons to want her to believe them quickly. There were things to do about the dead and about the people who would come looking for them. Her son thought she should take one look and know. She sat where she could see the man on the other side of the room. She took the time she needed.

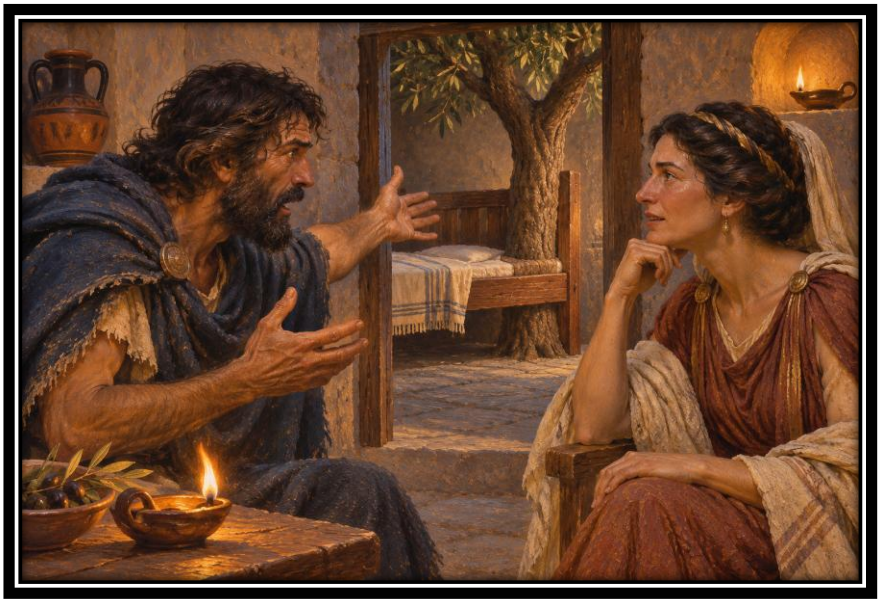
The Professor had seen people try to recognize somebody who had been gone a long while. They looked for one thing they could remember well enough to be sure of. If they found it, the rest of the face could be allowed to change. Penelope

let the man speak. Then she told a servant to move his bed out of the room.

Odysseus asked who had moved it. He knew where the tree was that he had used to make it. He had built the room around it. He could tell her how much of the tree he had taken off and what he had left standing. If the bed could be moved, somebody had come into his room and cut it free.

“He’s angry,” the Professor said quietly.

Lumen did not answer. She was watching Penelope. Her face had changed before the man had finished talking. She had waited to hear something she could be sure he knew, and there it was, down to the work it had taken him.



Penelope recognizes Odysseus as he describes their bed.

Later she told him what she had been afraid of. There had been time for a man to come to the house with a story about Odysseus and learn enough from other people to pass for him. The Professor had been listening to Odysseus tell stories

about strangers since they got to the Phaeacians. He would have believed him in Egypt. He wondered how many questions Penelope had thought of before she settled on the bed.

When she could ask him what he meant to do now, there was still something he had to tell her. A man he had spoken to among the dead had told him there would come a day when he had to carry an oar inland. He would know how far to go when somebody mistook it for a tool used with grain. The Professor had not remembered that the first time he read the poem. He had remembered the bed.

Lumen drew him away from the house. There was a little tree near the path and the Professor bent to look where it came out of the ground. He could have told somebody what kind of tree it was. He had no idea what it would have taken to make a bed that stayed there for twenty years.

On the way back he remembered the young man on the beach at Pylos, waiting to ask anyone who had known his father whether there was a chance he would come home. The Professor was glad his mother had had one question of her own.

Part IV

Before the names

What the priest told Solon

Hakan's tea was cool enough to drink. He put it down to look at the notebook. The Professor showed him the man at the oar and the woman on Djerba with the cloth. He had not drawn the Sirens. When he tried to say what they had promised to tell, he found there was a part he kept wanting to supply himself.

Hakan had moved the sugar bowl. In its place he had put the book they had used when they came home from Thera. He opened it where he had left a slip of paper. "Have you got room for another island?"

The Professor knew which one he meant. "It depends how big you want me to draw it."

Plato put his story in the mouth of Critias. In the account Critias gives, Solon hears it from an Egyptian priest. The priest tells of an Athens much older than the one Solon knew and of an island power beyond the Pillars of Heracles. Atlantis went down. Athens, which had stood against it, had lost the people who could have told what happened.

The Professor had once thought the whole thing might be easier to understand if he put Thera in place of the island. When he tried it now, there was a great deal he had to move or take out. He had a place for the eruption and nowhere to put the war.

“Perhaps somebody remembered the water,” Hakan said.

The Professor turned to a drawing he had made after the visit to Malia. There were rocks on it and something he meant for a piece of bread. A woman had been waiting for her brother. Her daughter brought the bread down and sat next to her. The Professor had found a place to sit with them until dark.

“I don’t think she would have started with the island,” he said.

“Who was she telling?”

“He hasn’t got that far,” Lumen said.

The Professor could think of several people the woman might speak to. There were people who knew her brother and people who would only want to know when it was safe to go back down to the shore. She might have had to tell the whole thing twice in a day and say it differently the second time.

Hakan put his cup down on a blank part of the map. “We’re a long way from Atlantis now.”

“I’d like to go back before the wave,” the Professor said.

Lumen had been looking at the little mark he had made for the bread. “What for?”

“I want to hear what somebody there thought was worth telling when they still had a house to tell it in.”

They went out by the back door. Hakan shifted the cup a little to the left before he went to put the kettle on. The Cyclops was still in the corner. A ring of tea had dried a little way off the shore.

Which way is close

The Professor could see the roof they were going to from where they stood. There was a fold in the ground between them and the roof. He expected to lose sight of it only a little while. He had drawn a line from Troy to Ithaca by the same easy reckoning. He had never asked how far apart two places would feel to the people who had to get from one to the other.

A woman bringing something to the next settlement let them go along with her. She wanted help when they got to a place where a pack had to be lifted. Before they had been on the road long, the ground began to come up on one side and go down very sharply on the other. She said something to Lumen. The Professor took it for advice about his footing until Lumen told him the woman used that word for the ridge.

“Does she have a name for the place beyond it?”

“She told the man this morning whose house she was going to.”

It took them a good part of the day. Twice the Professor saw a roof and thought it was the one he had started for. At the steepest part of the path they had to change how they held the load. By the time they went down the far side he was glad he knew who was expecting it. The woman set the pack down by the door and called a name. The person who came out knew the sound of her voice before she could see her.

On a different day Lumen brought him down to the water. The same people had something to take to an island. He thought he would ask how long it took. The man there wanted

first to know what wind he meant. The Professor pointed in the direction they were going. The man turned his hand a little and asked again.

They put out when the wind was right. A woman in the boat had brought a jar. She shared something from it with the man at the steering oar. He knew who had made the jar and asked how she was getting along. It occurred to the Professor that he had heard more questions like that on the boat than he had heard on the path over the ridge.

Centuries later, in the age of the Greek city-states, he and Lumen came through a pass and stopped where a man was waiting for someone from the next town. The man wanted to know whether people there would let flocks from his town use ground higher up. There had been a dry spell and there was still grass in one place he could see from where he stood. He had brought someone who could speak for the town. They were waiting for someone on the other side who could do the same.

The Professor could see how a valley might have a center of its own, with people who settled its quarrels and knew whose sheep had been there the year before. He could also see two towns that had a reason to agree on something. They would have to do it again when there was grass in another place. Far below, a road went down to the water.

When he took out the map again, he looked for the roof he had been so sure he could reach before midday. The map did not show it. He put his finger where he thought the ridge began and drew it down toward the water.

“It looked closer on paper,” he said.

“Which way?”

He held the map still until he could decide which journey she meant. She waited with him until a boat they had been watching went out of sight.

A place for the next voice

They went back to Akrotiri before the eruption. The Professor remembered a room where rain could run down a painted hillside forever and never reach the floor. They had come once to see somebody paint swallows. This time they passed the place where they thought the room was and went down toward the water. A woman was coaxing a boy back from a boat someone had drawn onto the shore. He had been told he could go down and look. He had gone far enough to put a foot on it.

Lumen asked what sort of boat he thought it was. He told her who it belonged to. She asked where he thought it went. He pointed to the other side of the island. The woman beside him said something that made him look farther away. He knew there was land out there. He had not thought to ask whether somebody he knew had seen it.

In the evening they went to a house where a man had come home from the sea. Somebody wanted to see a thing he had brought back. He fetched it from a sack, and the Professor leaned forward with the others. It was a small bowl. The man held it upside down to show where the foot had been made uneven. He had heard someone offer it to him from the other side of a wall. He told that part once to the woman who took the bowl and again to a child who came in after it had been handed around.

The child wanted to know why a man would hand out bowls from behind a wall. The traveler said he had only handed out one. When he told the part again, he used his free hand to

show how far the man had reached. He had paid something for the bowl. It took a little while for the child to ask him what.

The Professor sat back. He had come hoping for a story that would sound like something he knew. He thought the man might tell about a giant lifting a stone, or a place where people ate something they would never find at home. He had already decided what he would have put on the next page if the man had said either thing. It took him a while to notice how closely the girl was looking at the foot of the bowl.

When other people went to the doorway, she stayed by the man a little longer. She wanted to know whether he had seen the face on the other side of the wall. He said he had. She asked how. He took the bowl from her and set it on a shelf. Then he got down on one knee to make himself her height and showed her the place between the stones where a person could look through. She needed him to do it twice so she could see it from both sides.



Lumen went with the Professor when he stepped out. He had nothing in the notebook for the last hour. He had heard the child say something to a boy on the other side of the door. She had told him there was a man who lived inside a wall. He stopped to see if she would say more. The boy bent toward her to listen. She was looking at her hands, working out how to show the place the bowl had come through.

Back at the cottage Hakan had folded the map down to the size it had been when he took it out of the drawer. The Professor set the notebook beside it. He told Hakan about the bowl and about the man on the other side of the wall.

“Did he live in the wall?” Hakan asked.

The Professor thought of the girl by the door. “Give her a little time,” he said.

To Be Continued…

Historical Notes

Homer and the story before the book

The Iliad and Odyssey are among the earliest surviving works of Greek literature. They draw on an oral poetic tradition whose beginnings are inaccessible to us. Greek poetry belongs to a wider ancient world that already had written stories. Mesopotamian Gilgamesh traditions are earlier. The survival of a text tells us that a story was recorded and preserved.

Schein, Seth L., ed. Homer: Iliad Book I. Cambridge University Press, 2022. Introduction, §1.1, "The Poetic Context."

Jiménez, Enrique. "Gilgamesh/Gilgamesh Epic." Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature, 2025.

The voyages in the Odyssey

Books 3 and 4 follow Telemachus to Pylos and Sparta. In Book 4, Menelaus describes Egypt and his encounter with Proteus. Book 5 follows Odysseus from Calypso's island by raft. Books 6–8 bring him into the company of the Phaeacians and the singer Demodocus. Odysseus tells his hosts about the Cyclops, the Sirens and the loss of his crew in Books 9–12. See especially 9.82–104 and 9.105–566 for the Lotus-Eaters and Cyclops, and 12.165–200 for the Sirens. This book follows selected episodes from that account and reimagines their dialogue. The Cyclops's visitor calls himself "Nobody" here. Butler renders the name "Noman." Book 13 puts him ashore in Ithaca. His invented account of a raid on Egypt is in Book 14. Penelope's test of the bed is at 23.173–230. The oar prophecy appears in Book 11 and is recalled in Book 23. Book 24 continues beyond the reunion.

Homer. The Odyssey. Translated by Samuel Butler. Project Gutenberg, eBook 1727.

Homer. Odyssey 12. Samuel Butler translation, edited by Gregory Nagy and others. Perseus Digital Library.

Djerba and Sicily

Homer does not name Djerba. Strabo, writing centuries later, records a tradition associating Meninx, the island now called Djerba, with the Lotus-Eaters. Sicily also became associated with the Cyclopes. Samuel Butler made the Trapani area in western Sicily central to his reconstruction of the poem's geography. The itinerary in this book uses western Sicily as a place to explore one such tradition. The ancient association of Scylla and Charybdis with the Strait of Messina also belongs to the history of reading the poem.

Strabo. Geography 17.3.17 (Meninx).

Nova, Isabella. "The Cyclops Comes to Sicily: The Western Setting of a Homeric Episode." In Homer in Sicily, 155–178, 2023.

University at Buffalo. "The Theory of Samuel Butler 1897." Journey of Odysseus.

Folktales and the work of sailors

Justin Glenn relates the Cyclops story to a widespread folktale about blinding an ogre. The western Sicilian telling in this book is invented. Its existence in the story supplies no evidence of a particular origin for Homer's episode. Rupert Mann approaches the poem from another direction. He finds parallels between its episodes and problems known to sailors, including desertion and navigation through constricted waters.

Glenn, Justin. "The Polyphemus Myth: Its Origin and Interpretation." Greece & Rome 25, no. 2 (1978), 141–155.

Mann, Rupert. "Seafaring Practice and Narratives in Homer's Odyssey." Antichthon 53 (2019), 1–13.

The account of Atlantis

Plato's Timaeus 20d–25d presents the account through Critias, who traces it to Solon and an Egyptian priest. Plato places Atlantis beyond the Pillars of Heracles and sets the war in a far earlier past. Critias develops the account. Thera really did erupt in the Bronze Age. A historical line of transmission from that eruption to Plato's story has not been established.

Plato. Timaeus. Translated by Benjamin Jowett. Project Gutenberg, eBook 1572.

Plato. Critias. Translated by Benjamin Jowett. Project Gutenberg, eBook 1571.

The ridge and the harbor

Mountains, valleys, islands and harbors could shape how communities traveled, traded and dealt with their neighbors. Greek city-states took shape over time and also depended on political and social choices. The earlier journeys in this chapter imagine Bronze Age settlements. The later encounter at the pass belongs to the age of the Greek city-states.

Hansen, Mogens Herman. "Greek City-States." In The Oxford Handbook of the State in the Ancient Near East and Mediterranean, edited by Peter Fibiger Bang and Walter Scheidel. Oxford University Press, 2013.

Akrotiri before the eruption

Akrotiri on Thera preserves buildings, ceramics and wall paintings from the world the travelers revisit. The homecoming, the bowl and the girl's retelling are fictional. No record preserves the words of the people in that room.

National Archaeological Museum, Athens. "Collection of Antiquities of Thera."