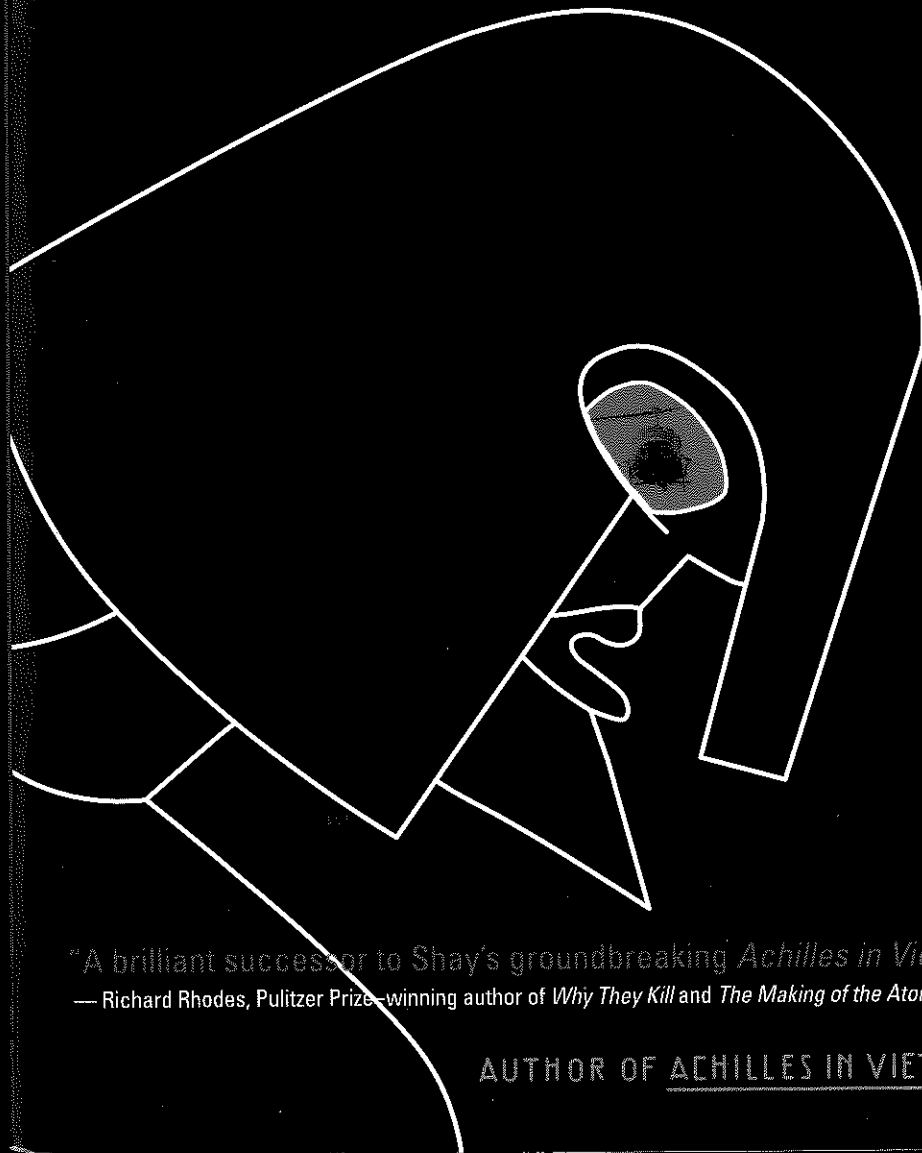


ODYSSEUS IN AMERICA  
COMBAT TRAUMA AND THE  
TRIALS OF HOMECOMING  
JONATHAN SHAY, M.D., PH.D. FOREWORD BY SENATORS  
JOHN MCCAIN AND MAX CLELAND



"A brilliant successor to Shay's groundbreaking *Achilles in Vietnam*."  
— Richard Rhodes, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *Why They Kill* and *The Making of the Atomic Bomb*

AUTHOR OF ACHILLES IN VIETNAM

quite [quiet] its worst in the central hillands was always sounds from lizards and I dont no what in the dark when it got quiet you [k]new them nva [North Vietnamese Army] fuckers was on toppa you.

Another veteran described how he had spoiled a very pleasant outing in the early autumn woods with his wife. When they stopped to picnic, she wanted to sit in a sunny meadow so as not to get chilled. He insisted on picnicking in deep shade “in the tree line,” because the meadow was too exposed. Exposed to what? To sniper and mortar rounds. In their argument over where to picnic, he agreed that it was chilly, but could not explain to his wife the nonnegotiable fear he experienced in open places. It’s not that the fear was “unconscious.” He knew he was afraid of snipers and mortars but was embarrassed to admit that he was afraid of these things in the pleasant woods of north coastal Massachusetts. This veteran and his wife had a nasty fight. In the heat of anger she said to him, “Why do you always spoil anything good? We were having such a nice day,” which made him feel ashamed and then angry. Embarrassed by its “irrationality,” he had never explained his reaction to open spaces to his wife. The near instantaneous replacement of the emotions of fear or embarrassment or shame with the emotion of anger does untold harm to veterans’ lives in their families, jobs, and communities.

Continuous mental and physiological mobilization for attack is the result of having learned *too well* how to survive in combat. When left unexplained, it becomes a burdensome and debilitating disability in life with others, but does not inevitably wreck that life. The problem of recovery from simple PTSD afterward in civilian life becomes a problem of unlearning combat adaptations and particularly of educating those the veteran lives with. Just as with physical injuries such as the loss of a limb, many veterans adapt to symptoms of simple PTSD, e.g., this veteran’s fear of open fields, without loss of the ability to have a good human quality of life. But with unhealed *complex* PTSD, all chance of a flourishing life is lost. We shall look at this more closely in Part Two.

At the Laestrygonian ford, this “great man,” Odysseus, does not trust his subordinates with the insight he has into the dangers of the place. His betrayal of responsibility could have caused lifelong mistrust in any sailors who escaped this and later death traps. Odysseus has surely betrayed what’s right by protecting himself and doing nothing to protect his men.<sup>5</sup> Many World War II vets see Douglas MacArthur at Corregidor in the same light as I see Odysseus at the Laestrygonian ford. “I don’t trust nobody,” is the voice of complex PTSD.

## 8

Witches, Goddesses, Queens, Wives—  
Dangerous Women

One of the ugliest characteristics of some psychologically injured Vietnam combat veterans we work with is their hostility and habitual disrespect toward women. They know that all members of the clinical team to which I belong, both men and women, find it hateful to hear them refer to women as “bitches,” “roadkill,” or “ho,” or obscenely as “cunts,” or condescendingly as “girls.” During a therapy group devoted to relationships, one veteran advised another with no apparent moral or psychological distress, “Why don’t you just kill the bitch?” When called on it, he claimed to be joking. Not *all* these veterans are hostile to women; in fact, some of the most influential veterans in the program make their displeasure clear when there is such talk around them. Nevertheless, negative attitudes toward women are a continuing obstacle to veterans feeling at home.

Turning back to Odysseus as a veteran (rather than as a military leader), the *Odyssey* shows how dangerous a woman may be to returning veterans: she can trick you onto a fragile sea raft from the safety of dry land and then drown you (Calypso), she can betray you to assassins who lie in wait for you (Clytemnestra and—who knows?—maybe Penelope), she can see through and betray your disguise, getting you killed (Helen’s chance to blow Odysseus’ disguise to the Trojans), she can accidentally get you killed by seeing through your disguise (Odysseus’ old childhood nurse, Eurycleia), she can hand you over to toughs who habitually kill strangers (Nausicaa), she can turn you into a

Phaeacian Court  
Raid on Ismarus  
Lotus Land  
Cyclops  
King of the Winds  
Deadly Fiord  
➤ Circe  
Among the Dead  
Sirens  
Scylla and Charybdis  
Sun God’s Cattle  
Whirlpool  
Calypso  
At Home, Ithaca

caged pig eating acorns or castrate you in her bed (Circe), she can fill you with such obsession that you forget to eat and starve to death (Sirens), she can literally eat men alive (Soylla). She may have gotten you and your friends into the war to begin with, where most of them were killed (Helen).<sup>1</sup>

The cumulative impression of female dangerousness and untrustworthiness in the *Odyssey* is overwhelming.

Just two lines of the poem carry Odysseus' ship from the carriage in the fiord, to the island home of the witch-goddess Circe, "the nymph with lovely braids, an awesome power too . . . the true sister of murderous-minded Aeetes" (10:149ff. Fagles). Nymphs were minor goddesses, usually associated with wonder-arousing natural features, like caves, waters, forests.

The one remaining ship and its crew land on a wooded island, Circe's island, but they don't know that yet, being utterly lost. They grieve and panic for two days on the shore. On the third day Odysseus does a reconnaissance. From a lookout he sees smoke. Returning to the shore, he divides his crew in two and puts one platoon in the charge of Eurylochus, his kinsman. Everyone is scared that this is *another* death trap, and they cast lots to decide which of the two platoons will go inland to see where the smoke came from. Eurylochus loses the toss and heads inland with his platoon. They get to Circe's palace and find it surrounded by strangely tame lions and wolves. Quaking with fear, they make their way to the door, hear a woman's enchanting song, and call out. They are immediately admitted, but Eurylochus smells a trap and doesn't go in. The others enter and are treated to luscious mulled wine in royal style. It's a honey trap!—the men's wine has been drugged and she taps each with her magic wand, turning them into pigs. Eurylochus sees them being driven into sties and flung acorns by the contemptuous witch. He breaks for the ship and, speechless with terror, finally gets the story out. Odysseus puts on his armor, straps on his sword, and says, Lead me back there. Eurylochus is too scared. Odysseus shrugs and says, Never mind, I'll find my own way.

We already know that Odysseus has friends in high places, and one of these, the god Hermes, pops out of nowhere just short of Circe's palace.

Where are you going now, my unlucky friend . . . ?

And your men are all in there . . .

cooped up like swine, hock by jowl in the sties.

Have you come to set them free?

Well, I warn you, you won't get home yourself,  
you'll stay right there, trapped with the rest.  
But wait, I can save you . . .

Look, here is a potent drug. Take it to Circe's halls . . .

She'll mix you a potion, lace the brew with drugs  
but she'll be powerless to bewitch you, even so—  
this magic herb I give will fight her spells.

Now here's your plan of action . . .

The moment Circe strikes with her long thin wand,  
you draw your sharp sword . . .

and rush her fast as if to run her through!

She'll cower in fear and coax you to her bed—

Like a good fairy tale, the magic herb will counteract the magic spell.  
And Hermes warns of another peril, once the first is overcome:

But don't refuse the goddess' bed . . .

but have her swear the binding oath of the blessed gods  
she'll never plot . . . to harm you,

once you lie there naked—  
never unman you . . .

(10:310–34, Fagles)

What do these two dangers mean?

Circe has transformed Odysseus' crew into pigs. Pigs were an honorable form of wealth, second only to beef cattle and horses.<sup>2</sup> But still, calling someone a domestic pig was no flattery, in the sense that calling him a lion or wild boar might have been. Circe has destroyed the dignity of the crewmen she has transformed, made them her slaves, and caused them to eat animal fodder—utterly demeaning them. Who eats what is enormously important in the moral and social world of the *Odyssey*, marking the difference between animal and human, between god-fearing and sacrilegious.

One metaphorical reading of she-turns-men-into-pigs is this: if returning veterans behave like pigs to the hometown women, it must be—according to the veterans—the women's own doing. They turn men into mud-wallowing swine. As implausible as this may seem as an "eternal verity," first recorded by Homer, the beliefs that some veterans have about their womenfolk support this. The prejudicial stereotype of Vietnam veterans as chronically violent domestic tyrants turns out to have another side,

the veteran who allows himself to be a doornat, a domestic slave to his wife or girlfriend. These overly compliant veterans hate their domestic lives, hate themselves, and often hate the partners whom they blame for their own passive slavishness in the home.

Wilson (pseudonym for a composite of several veterans) is a handsome, athletic man with thick black hair who was in our program at the time I joined it fourteen years ago. He had served two tours as an infantryman in Vietnam. His ex-wife (also a composite) refused while they were married ever to meet or speak with the treatment team. This is a normal part of our program, and rarely refused. She told the team members who called her that she was not going to waste her time "talking about that moron." Yet every day she would leave him a detailed written schedule of tasks, as if he were a domestic servant, and berate him if he failed to accomplish any of them. Their only child, a daughter, whom he now hardly ever sees because of the divorce, was the apple of his eye. For many years he daily made her lunch, took her to school, and picked her up each day, in between housework, yard work, and home repair. His wife did the family shopping, because he had panic attacks in public places such as the supermarket.

While the marriage lasted his wife treated him with open contempt in front of their daughter. His wife's mother would join her in verbal abuse of the veteran, switching off every so often with abuse of their daughter, who they said was "just like her father."

He struggled constantly against violent images of how he would make his wife beg for her life as he had with suspected Viet Cong during the war. When these impulses became overwhelming, he would ask our assistance to get him admitted to the VA hospital. Once, two years before he joined our program, he had lost control and beaten his wife unconscious and the police took him screaming in Vietnamese to the VA hospital. She refused to cooperate with the police in prosecuting him. Then she repeatedly threw this incident in his face over the years that followed. She once even had him taking phone messages from a man who turned out to be both her lover and her cocaine dealer.

For many years in the clinic he spilled torrents of what can only be called "hate speech" against women, blaming all women for his unhappy and demeaning home life. "All" women were "always" out to control, manipulate, trip off, and humiliate men. "That man-hating bitch" was his usual moniker for his wife.

Much of the treatment with veterans like Wilson consists in strengthening two sets of seemingly opposing mental muscles: strengthening

control over impulses to violence, while at the same time strengthening their ability to assert their own need for respectful treatment in their own homes and to assert authority over their own time, rather than allowing their wives to schedule it entirely to suit their convenience. Unfortunately, sometimes their wives find their husbands' newly revealed personal dignity intolerable and file for divorce. In a number of cases they have successfully used police records of past violence toward them in court to paint the veterans as unfit to have visitation with their children.

Wilson grieves over the loss of contact with his daughter and tries to take solace in the other veterans' advice to be patient, that his daughter will return to him when she is no longer under her mother's thumb. He now has a new girlfriend with whom he has been able to negotiate a safe and mutually respectful partnership. While he still spews hatred of his ex-wife and her mother, he no longer speaks in violent or demeaning ways about women in general. Because he now has confidence in his own self-control, he no longer needs to be a compliant puppet to protect others from his own violence. His fear of his own violence had paralyzed his capacity for even dignified and nonviolent self-assertion. If Wilson was passive and overcompliant with his ex-wife it was because he feared himself, not her.

Homer seemed to understand men's capacity to blame women for everything. Unfortunately, he also seems to say that this blame is entirely justified. I cannot detect a shred of doubt or irony in his picture of Circe. Recall the god Hermes' instructions to Odysseus. If she turned into a tame sex kitten, it was only because Odysseus was ready to stab her with his sword. As a goddess, she could not be killed, but she could be temporarily hurt. Perhaps more important to her submission was Odysseus' demand for the magic oath Hermes had instructed him to exact. Presumably this oath is unknown to ordinary mortals and tipped off Circe that Odysseus had the backing of another, stronger god.<sup>3</sup>

The second half of Hermes' warnings and advice to Odysseus touches on a very different source of woman hating: fear that they conceal deadly weapons in their alluring beds and sexual parts. Hermes warns him of Circe's counterattack, once he defeats her drug and magic spell: she will lure him into her bed for sex and then cut off his sexual organs. In the world of fairy tales, we are willing to believe Hermes' instruction that Odysseus can protect himself from this second attack by exacting a special oath from Circe not to "unman" him.

American soldiers in Vietnam were in a world where such threats were thought to be real and the gods very far away and uncommunicative.

These soldiers could not protect themselves with words and oaths. One widely circulated rumor among American GIs in Vietnam was that prostitutes were Viet Cong cadres, who put razor blades or broken glass in their vaginas. A variant of this was the advice never to fall asleep after sex with a prostitute, because the VC would sneak in and cut off your balls. Similar to these rumors, but with more frequent basis in reality, was the fear that Vietnamese prostitutes harbored antibiotic-resistant strains of venereal diseases, known collectively as the "black syph."

The painful and destructive legacy that some veterans brought home with them from the Vietnam War was this visceral sense that women are dangerous. Remember that many young men had their first sustained experience with sex in the demeaning and dangerous context of prostitution in Vietnam. Veterans have told me that they always went armed to "steam and cream," a brothel providing steam bath, massage, and ejaculation. Rapes and rape-murders of Vietnamese prostitutes were widely known. They were not investigated by either military police or South Vietnamese civilian police. Fear, anger, and violence do not lay groundwork for any postwar sexual life that deserves the name "intimacy," not to speak of sweetness or delight. Exactly the contrary.

Once Odysseus defeats Circe's plan to turn him into a pig like the rest of his crew (with a little assistance from the god Hermes), she enthusiastically pulls him to frolics in bed, punctuated only by daily feasts of meat and wine. Her words to him are like a combat veteran's wish-fulfillment dream:

Royal . . . Odysseus, man of action,  
no more tears now; calm these tides of sorrow.  
Well I know what pains you bore on the swarming sea,  
what punishment you endured from hostile men on land.  
But come now, eat your food and drink your wine  
till the same courage fills your chests, now as then,  
when you first set sail from native land. . . .  
*Now you are burnt-out husks, your spirits haggard, sore,  
always brooding over your wanderings long and hard,  
your hearts never lifting with any joy—  
you've suffered far too much.*

(10:502ff; Fagles; emphasis added)

Odysseus laps it up and apparently forgets all about his faithful wife, Penelope, and son and homecoming for a whole year, until his shipmates

snap him out of it—"Captain, this is madness! / High time you thought of your own home at last" (10:520f, Fagles).

Circe's inviting bed would appear to need little decoding as an obstacle to returning home, but that appearance may be misleading. I wrote above about the danger and degradation that often permeated sex with prostitutes in Vietnam, as one obstacle. Another obstacle, the extreme opposite of danger and degradation, is described by a veteran, a former Airborne officer, who has never been my patient. His picture of sex with prostitutes in the midst of a war—a dreamlike, wonderland quality—created its own obstacle to homecoming. I shall omit explicit sexual detail:

FROM "LOVE AND WHORES" BY DENNIS SPECTOR<sup>4</sup>

What would the good mothers of the PTA say if they knew what type of sex their sons got off on in Vietnam? Those wonderful women who bake cookies and expect their boys to go off to war, with all the glory of the 4th of July and Memorial Day parades. . . .

[In Vietnam] you learn that the quickest way to a man's heart is through his cock. . . .

If it is your first time, getting your rocks off, it's even more believed. And, it was the first time for almost all of us in the 1960s. Mary Magdalene is part of our heritage of forgiveness and redemption. There was no redemption in our jungle of blood, redemption could be found in taking care of a vulnerable woman and being taken care of in return. A redeeming time of peace and care and passion. No killing, only female softness, femininity of giving totally in the care of a strong man.

These Vietnamese women were perfect beauties, small-boned, very delicate, petite beauties with soft, smooth olive-colored skin, and the gentle rounded curves of youth, girl-like in their beauty. The natural way they ply their trade created a perfectly good loving acceptance of these whores by a man. They needed us to care for them and protect them, that was the only way they could survive. The hardships and constant touch of death made this love right for us, for this moment it was love, all soft yielding, pleasing flesh. We begged for it. We knew that: "Hey, I could be dead tomorrow. So why not live every moment?" The insanity, lies, cruelty all around us, all of the time, made us want to run to the soft gentle flesh of a woman accepting, without any hint of danger, a respite from the killing to make life intimate and worth living again. . . . We needed nurturance so badly, they gave it to us so naturally. They needed a man to take care of and protect them. . . . These women had no choice, and that also made it right. . . .

These Asian whores treated an American like a king. Sather [the author's pseudonym for himself] had seen so many ladies get serious about a GI, believing he would really be allowed to bring her home, wanting his loving protection, falling so loyally in love with him. . . .

These women were all passion, it was their femininity, that was all that they knew. They wanted to make it real if they could.

In the U.S., Sather missed the passion.

Circe's offer—once Odysseus has intimidated her—of sex, baths, food, wine as therapy for a haggard, seer spirit appears to have played out in reality among some American combat soldiers in Vietnam. These Eurasian and Afro-Asian prostitutes, whom Spector describes as working in bar-whorehouses in “a boom boom village” at the crossing of two roads that Spector’s unit was patrolling, were not free, self-determining sex workers. They had probably been sold to the brothels as children, or they had been born in the brothels, being outcasts because of their mixed race. They were, as most prostituted women in the world are, enslaved. Spector writes of this village among the rubber plantations, “Decades of French Foreign Legion assured this legacy of outcasts. The South Vietnamese hated the mixed races of Senegalese, Algerian, Moroccan, French. . . . The only living open to these women was the same as their mothers, as whores.”

If homecoming means returning to the specific civilian world from which one departed for war, to its now boring job, to its now trivial social demands, to the annoying insistence that things be paid for, to an unsexy wife, and to a crowded and unglamorous neighborhood, then perhaps a life of limitless sex, food, and wine with a rich, bewitching nymph (and later with the another nymph, Calypso) sure could distract a guy from coming home! But two questions spring to mind: How real is this threat to a soldier’s homecoming? Does Odysseus’ affair with Circe shed any light on the mistrust and hostility toward women described in the earlier part of this chapter?

A minority of the men I work with today have active, let alone promiscuous, sexual lives—now. The rest are not celibate on principle, but are socially isolated—even in their own homes, sometimes living on a different floor from their partner—that there is little occasion for sexual intimacy. However, many went through periods during the first decade after returning from Vietnam when they apparently did seek the solace that Circe specifically offers in wine, good food, and great sex. Veterans have described periods when they were wildly promiscuous, having sex with as

many as three women a day over an extended period. We shall return to the subject of sexaholism in Chapter 14.

Perhaps it’s the New England moralist in me speaking, but I do not believe there is salvation for a haggard, seer spirit in sex, or even romance. In fact, I speculate that the hostility toward women displayed by many veterans with PTSD stems from *disappointment* of the hope that “the love of a good woman” would be enough to heal the wounds of war: “If my wife (or wives) did not do that for me, it must be because they had some other agenda.” Or to be more exact, if the momentary relief found in sex from the after-effects of combat did not last, then the woman must have taken that relief away from the veteran for some sinister or self-serving reason. A young man coming home to America hoping for, possibly expecting, the kind of wonderland dream-love-sex described above by Dennis Spector might well be bitterly disappointed. He might well conclude that women are to blame for his disappointment. Homer puts a similar wish-fulfillment dream into Circe’s words with such beauty and understanding of what a returning war veteran wants that it’s extremely painful to recall that it *is* a fiction, it *is* a dream, and she *is* a nymph, a demigoddess, and not a merely mortal woman.

A real-world woman, in America, meeting a haggard combat veteran, might have been as understanding as Circe, but unlike Circe had no staff of serving women, had to consider how to pay to keep up the household, had a life with her own family and friends apart from the veteran.

Dennis Spector writes the following about his experience when he returned:

Coming home to women is very hard, it is impossible to reestablish an intimacy. They just can’t relate. . . .

Women are treated so well in our society, there life is so gentle. I’m glad that they are. I’m talking about the average American female. That is the good side of the double standard. . . .

It’s not because they don’t have it, it’s that we have changed. We can’t share our inner self with them. We come home with the reality, there’s blood on the risers, there’s blood on our hands, there’s friends we can’t touch. What happened is scary, very scary. We have this reality, we know that it can happen again. . . .

How can you come home to a woman and be yourself after combat? How can she even understand that? You can hardly be yourself again.

I went to see that great movie *Born on the Fourth of July* with my wife. We went to a matinee, at a small theater. Only eight couples were there.

Born on the *Fourth of July* did something, it explained the death of a soul. . . . When you come back you find that they lied to you. It had the . . . analogy of the death of a spine with the hero. It was the first movie that captured the idea that you have to . . . have a rebirth, whatever it is, you have to have it.

I remembered looking around the theater and all the people were still sitting around, just like I was. You could tell they were all my age. I could hear the whispers. . . . I got out of there quickly because I was going to cry and I don't like to cry. They were hit by the story of a need for rebirth, just like I was hit.

My wife could not understand what I was talking about.

How do you bridge that gap? . . . I understood the need for a rebirth. She could not comprehend what happened to me, because she had never been beaten up. If she had been raped, abused, beaten, scared, or starved [like the mixed-race Vietnamese outcast prostitutes?], she could understand. I am glad that she wasn't.

And, I thought: "How many people have touched a dead person. Or have had to put their buddies in a bag, and made sure that you got all the parts. Or, stuffed their stomach back in so that you could get them out."

You have sex, but you don't have intimacy. We live in a hell that is ours alone and we don't want to drag her into it, so we live in there alone and cut off intimacy.

With a life partner you want to be able to share everything with her. You can't even come close, she has never experienced anything like that. Her image is the illusion that a man goes off to fight, you're strong, you come home and you build your life.

You have the reality.<sup>5</sup>

Here Spector emphasizes the chasm between the danger and horror of war and the safe complacency of civilian life and the chasm between veterans and women.

The theme that women are dangerous and untrustworthy because of their deceptive *mētis* and because they allure men with secret powers will haunt the rest of the *Odyssey*. The opening four books of the *Odyssey* concerning Odysseus' wife and son at home in Ithaca depict women in a generally favorable light, especially the faithful and long-suffering Penelope. As Odysseus is presented as a "man of pain," she is a woman of pain who *could* understand this husband. She also has plenty of *mētis* herself, including the famous trick of the shroud that she weaves each day, and unweaves every evening to deceive the suitors (2:100ff, Fitzgerald). But

this *mētis* is apparently in the service of loyalty to her husband. Homer depicts females who are powerful, but not actively malevolent on their own account, such as Queen Arete. But early on, we hear about the scare-figure of Queen Clytemnestra, King Agamemnon's treacherous wife. Agamemnon's brother, Menelaus, says of her—

A stranger killed my brother; in cold blood—  
Tricked blind, caught in the web of his deadly queen.

(4:98f, Fitzgerald)

With the introduction of Circe in Book 10 the picture of women gets rapidly worse and more sinister as we encounter autonomously dangerous female beings who are *both* powerful *and* malevolent. Clytemnestra becomes Agamemnon's murderer, rather than merely an accomplice, says Agamemnon in the Underworld—

There's nothing more deadly, bestial than a woman  
set on works like these—what a monstrous thing  
she plotted, slaughtered her own lawful husband

(10:484ff, Fagles)

And it is impossible to avoid the emotional impact of the cosmic she-evil of Scylla, the six-headed man-eating monster in the narrow strait across from a giant whirlpool, Charybdis, also gendered female. When facing such powerful female malevolence, Circe says—run for your life:

That nightmare [Scylla] cannot die, being eternal  
evil itself—horror, and pain, and chaos;  
there is no fighting her, no power can fight her,  
all that avails is flight.

(12:139f, Fitzgerald)

Our encounter here with Circe merely opens a theme we shall meet again and again in the chapters that follow.

## Among the Dead: Memory and Guilt

Veterans carry the weight of friends' deaths *in* war and *after* war, and the weight of all those irretrievable losses among the living that, like the dead, can never be brought back. When Circe tells Odysseus that their homeward route takes them through Hades, the House of Death, Odysseus says, "So she . . . crushed the heart inside me" (10.546, Fagles). Who has ever heard of anyone coming back alive from Death? It is his longest single "adventure."<sup>9</sup>

### THE DEAD (TRY TO) REPROACH THE LIVING

Homer enlarges our understanding of what is conventionally called "survivor guilt"<sup>10</sup>—the lesson being in the contrast—Odysseus' almost complete *absence of moral pain, guilt, self-reproach, and self-criticism*.

Phaeacian Court
Raid on Ismarus
Lotus Land
Cyclops
King of the Winds
Deadly Fiord
Circe
> Among the Dead
Sirens
Scylla and Charybdis
Sun God's Cattle
Whirlpool
Calypso
At Home, Ithaca

His encounter in the Underworld with the great Ajax is particularly revealing. In courage, self-sacrifice, combat leadership, fighting skill, and fortitude, Ajax was second only to Achilles in the entire Greek army. His strength and giant stature were legendary, as was his unadorned, simple, and almost tongue-tied manner of speech. By contrast, Odysseus is glib and tricky-tongued. Ajax was a man of deeds, not words. When Achilles was killed, his corpse and armor were saved from the enemy. The armor was awarded during a grand assembly as a prize of honor to—honey-tongued Odysseus! Afterward, in humiliation and rejection, Ajax suffers a psychotic break in which a corral full of consecrated animals becomes—in his delusion—the hated top leadership, Agamemnon, Menelaus, and

their henchmen. He kills them all. When he snaps out of his delusion surrounded by the slaughtered sacred animals, he is doubly humiliated, religiously defiled, and kills himself by falling on his sword.<sup>11</sup>

This is how Odysseus tells his encounter with Ajax, the suicide, in the underworld:

Only the ghost of Great Ajax . . .  
kept his distance, blazing with anger at me still  
for the victory I had won . . . that time  
I pressed my claim for the arms of Prince Achilles.

Would to god I'd never won such trophies!  
All for them the earth closed over Ajax,  
that proud hero Ajax . . .  
greatest in build, greatest in works of war . . .  
I cried out to him now, I tried to win him over.  
'Ajax . . . still determined,  
even in death, not once to forget that rage  
you train on me for those accursed arms?  
The Gods set up that prize to plague the [Greeks]—  
so great a tower of strength we lost when you went down!

Zeus sealed your doom.  
Come closer, king, and listen to my story,  
Conquer your rage, your blazing, headstrong pride!  
So I cried out but Ajax answered not a word.

(11.620-43, Fagles)

In the value system of warrior heroism constructed by the *Iliad*—which Achilles and Ajax embodied—there was only one choice for who should receive the arms of the dead Achilles as the army's prize of honor, and that was Ajax. Exactly how Odysseus weaseled it for himself doesn't matter. He never should have competed for them, and never should have used his *mētis* to win them.<sup>12</sup> I hear his apparently large-spirited attempt to make peace with the shade of Ajax—he cannot bring him back to life!—as posturing for the Phaeacian audience to show his superiority to Ajax. In the honor code of the *Iliad*, Odysseus' generosity to his defeated rival is actually a kind of further put-down.

The lyric poet Pindar, who is closely associated with the pan-Hellenic athletic "tour," of which the Olympic Games are the best known today,



composed the following bitter lines about Odysseus' "sophistry" in cheating Ajax out of his arms:

Sophistry [lit., "persuasion with hostile intent"] was rank then too,  
Mongering fictions, two-hearted, cultivating its vile sleights.  
It desolates all splendor, then for obscurity  
Raises some hollow monument.

(*Nemean* 8, lines 32–34, Mullen, trans.)<sup>5</sup>

The Olympics were contested with Achilles, so to speak, as their tutelary spirit. Professor Gregory Nagy writes,

We know from ancient sources that the traditional ceremony inaugurating . . . [the Olympic Games] centers on Akhilleus: on the day before the Games are to begin, the local women of Elis, the place where the Olympics were held, fix their gaze on the sun as it sets into the Western horizon—and begin ceremonially to weep for the hero.<sup>6</sup>

Pindar glorifies Achilles and treats us to visions of Achilles running down deer and lions at age six, and enumerates his combat kills to glorify him.<sup>7</sup> Straightforward Achilles survived as the culture hero, not tricky-tongued Odysseus.

Sophocles, and the other Athenian tragic poets, detested Odysseus as a sleazy ass-kisser to the powerful Agamemnon and Menelaus, according to Homer scholar W. B. Stanford.<sup>8</sup> In the Athenian poets' eyes he is "quibbling, unscrupulous, corrupt, ambitious, self-serving, sophistic, rejoicing to make the worse argument appear the better."<sup>9</sup> Stanford's chapter title on how the Athenian tragic poets presented Odysseus says it all: "Stage Villain." Their hostility has been attributed variously to the politics of the day, pandering to popular prejudice, and dramatic utility. Euripides' portrait of Odysseus is "without a redeeming feature."<sup>10</sup> However, I believe much of this attitude is explained by the simple fact that *all* the practitioners of Athenian tragedy—as indeed was everyone in the audience—were themselves combat veterans. Aeschylus fought at Marathon (his brother was killed there), Plataea, and Salamis; Sophocles was elected general at least twice—and this was no mere popularity contest, slanted by his successful theater pieces. The voters' lives depended on his skill and leadership during the revolt of Samos in 441.<sup>11</sup>

Having rejected Odysseus' remorse over Ajax's suicide as insincere, I cannot use his visit to the Underworld as a metaphor for survivor guilt—

except by way of contrast. Typically, survivors of horrible trauma consider their *own* pain unworthy compared to that of others who "had it worse." According to Army veteran Mary Garvey, women who served in the Vietnam era, but who were never in country, include women who—

are very very affected . . . and not just the women who were there . . . who are of course very very affected . . . but women who weren't . . . and feel that therefore their feelings, in fact their PTSD, are not legitimate . . . " I only was a nurse in a burn unit in Japan." " I only was a nurse in a psychiatric ward in the States. I only met the coffins at the Air Force base. I only worked with the medical films taken of the wounded. I only was a stewardess and delivered them there. I only typed up the lists of the dead. Or from yours truly; I only sent them off to die."<sup>12</sup>

Placing one's self in a "hierarchy of suffering" to one's own disadvantage is widespread among trauma survivors. I have written about this phenomenon among Vietnam combat veterans in *Achilles in Vietnam*.<sup>13</sup>

#### "I WON'T FORGET A THING"—KEEPING FAITH

Elpenor, the most recently dead among Odysseus' crew, greets him in the Underworld. He has died unheroically the morning of Odysseus' departure from Circe's palace, snapping his neck in an accidental fall from the flat roof where he had been sleeping. Either Odysseus was unaware of his death, or after lingering a year at Circe's table and in her bed was suddenly in too much of a hurry to give him a proper cremation and burial.<sup>14</sup> The ghost of Elpenor begs Odysseus to give him these rites, which will allow him to rest in death, rather than wander painfully through all eternity:

You and your ship will put ashore again  
 . . . [at Circe's island] . . . then and there,  
 my lord, *remember me*, I beg you! Don't sail off  
 and desert me, left behind unwept, unburied, don't . . .  
 No, burn me in full armor, all my harness,  
 heap my mound by the churning gray surf—  
 a man whose luck ran out—  
 so even men to come will learn my story,  
 Perform my rites, and plant on my tomb that oar  
 I swung with mates when I rowed among the living.

(11:77ff, Eagles; emphasis added)

Soldiers, sailors, marines, airmen, no matter how humble and undistinguished, abhor being *forgotten*. Elpenor wrests a promise from Odysseus to cremate and bury him with full military honors. Odysseus can't brush this aside, coming from a ghost:<sup>15</sup>

'All this, my unlucky friend, I assured him,  
I will do for you. I won't forget a thing.'  
(11.87f, Eagles; emphasis added)

The families of combat veterans, and sometimes even their therapists, demand in frustration, "Why can't you put it behind you? *Why can't you just forget it?*" Odysseus' vow, "I won't forget a thing," is the vow of a combat soldier to his dead comrades to keep faith with them, to keep their memory alive. Bewildered families, hurt and feeling cheated by the amount of energy their veterans pour into dead comrades, apparently do not realize that to forget the dead dishonors the living veteran. In asking the veteran to forget, the family asks him to dishonor himself. For anyone, civilian or veteran, to be told to do something dishonorable usually evokes *anger*. Imagine, for example, that your mother has died within the last year or so, and your spouse or your employer says to you, "Just forget about her."

The resuscitative function of memory—bringing the dead back to life—takes many, often unrecognized forms. Intractable guilt, rage, or grief sometimes serves this honorable purpose of keeping faith with the dead. Many a well-meaning therapist has stumbled onto an exploding land mine of rage from a veteran by making the well-intended, supportive remark, "You don't have to feel guilty about that."

One of the founders of the modern trauma field, Yael Danieli, who has worked mainly with Holocaust survivors and their children and grandchildren, observed the four "existential functions of guilt": to deny helplessness; to keep the dead alive by making them ever present in thought; to sustain loyalty to the dead; and to affirm that the world is still a just place where someone (even if only the guilt-ridden survivor alone) feels guilt at what was done.<sup>16</sup> Danieli's observations on guilt can equally be extended to grief and to rage. Grief rejects helpless acquiescence to the rupture of attachment and affirms that someone is still attached to the dead and still cares that they ever lived. Rage affirms that someone will still avenge the dead or at least never forgive those responsible. The other three functions are the same as for guilt.

Odysseus' encounter with dead comrades in Hades can be seen as a

metaphor for the pervasive presence of the dead in the inner worlds of some combat veterans. They are truly "haunted." I have thought long and hard about how such haunting can be prevented, and now believe that the answer lies in changing the modern American military culture on grief. After battle, once it is safe enough for everyone to sleep, it's safe enough to grieve; and the unit should do this together, with the unit's direct leaders setting an example with their own tears.<sup>17</sup>

What follows is my own narrative of a recent encounter with a veteran I have known for all fourteen years I have been with the VA.

### Timmy

The thirty-five-year-old flashlight snap has a slightly greenish hue that makes the five young men look a bit sickly. In black-and-white photocopies that I make from it with the veteran's permission, the youth and health of these men is easier to see. They are unmarked, unscarred. It was taken five or so days before Christmas 1967 and a small plastic Christmas tree is just visible at the bottom of the photo like the trunk of a tree—the five young men arranged in a triangle above it are the tree's crown. The tropics—two of the five are not wearing shirts. The flash picture, indoors, washes out the youngster closest to the lens, so I have to make the photocopies darker to see the trooper in front and lighter to see the one in back.

"That's Timmy, two days before he died."

He points to another young man in the picture and tells me he went to Saigon shortly after the picture was taken. They never saw him again, never knew what happened to him.

I know how much Timmy meant to my patient. The picture was sent to him Christmas 2001 by Timmy's mother, who had received it thirty-five years ago from the young man closest to the lens in the lower right.

Until about five years ago my patient had—inexplicably to his family—refused to answer the telephone or to collect mail from the mailbox. He was terrified that the person calling or writing would be Timmy's mother, asking him how Timmy died. He was the only witness and had made the affidavit that allowed Timmy to be classified as KIA, rather than MIA.

A soldier not in the picture—these were members of my patient's tank platoon—tracked my patient down a few years ago to tell him that he had met Timmy's mother with another member of the platoon, and that she was the *nicest* person. Wouldn't he like to contact her? She remembered my patient very well and that Timmy and he had been closest friends on the tank together. Another member of the platoon had visited

Timmy's mother in her small farming community in Ohio, and the whole town turned out to welcome him and to honor Timmy—thirty years after his death.

In *Achilles in Vietnam*, this veteran remembered his friend:

He wasn't a harmful person. He wasn't a dirty person. He had this head that was wide up at the top, and his chin come down to a point. He had this hair he used to comb to his right side and he always had this big cowlick in back. Big old cowlick. And when he smiled—you ever hear "ear to ear"?—it was almost a gooney-looking smile. You know, it was just WA-a-ay—it was huge. He just had this big, huge smile. He never said nothing bad about nobody. He was just . . . he was a caring person.

And when you're on a tank, it's like a closeness you never had before. It's closer than your mother and father, closer than your brother or your sister, or whoever you're closest with in your family. . . . Because you get three guys that are on that tank, and you're just stuck together. You're there.

It should've been me.

I jumped first. It didn't blow me up. Sa-a-ame spot. Same spot. Same exact spot.<sup>18</sup>

I sit across from the veteran in my tiny VA office with this old photo in my hand and begin to weep. I have known him for fourteen years. I have known the story of Timmy's death in an antitank mine explosion and of its lifelong effects on my patient. These smooth, healthy, athletic young men in the long-ago picture remind me of my own son, who is now their age, and my teariness turns to uncontrollable sobbing. I think of the "grief fixed upon . . . [the] heart" of any parent who loses a child in war, and upon the hearts of their closest comrades.

After years of therapy, this veteran has worked through his fear that his story and his life will injure his therapists, and he waits tranquilly for my tears to stop. "It's okay, Doc," he says quietly. His native kindness and decency and sweetness—which war ripped out of him for a long time—are all in his voice.

He did visit Timmy's mother, and they now are in regular phone contact.

#### ANYONE CLOSE WILL BE HARMED

The death of close comrades received a great deal of attention in the *Iliad* as the source of unbearable grief, guilt, and a trigger for the berserk state. The *Odyssey* shows in metaphor that veterans carry guilt for deaths and

losses that happened after the war's end. Odysseus' mother, Anticleia, is the next specter who comes to him out of the darkness. Odysseus has no idea until this moment that she has died! He must, following Circe's instructions, hold all the shades off until he has heard from the ghost of Teiresias, the great seer and prophet. But when that is done, his mother is the first ghost he reanimates with sacrificial blood, following Circe's magic ritual instructions.

She died, she says, because, "yearning for you . . . robbed me of my soul" (11:202-3, orig., Ahl and Roisman, trans.).<sup>19</sup> The word Homer uses for "yearning" is the same as Achilles used to describe his yearning for his dead comrade, Patroclus (*pothos/pothē*, *Iliad* 19:321, orig.). Because of this yearning Achilles can take neither food nor drink. Thus the text hints that Anticleia starved herself to death in a melancholic depression. In effect, she says to her son, "You killed me, that's why I'm here in Hades." When you add it up, nearly *everyone* who has anything to do with Odysseus gets hurt.<sup>20</sup> He lives up to his odious name, "he who sows trouble for others." If this is Odysseus' perspective on himself, the *Odyssey* certainly adopts his perspective.

The point of this for veterans is *not* that they "spoil everything they touch," but rather that many of the men I have worked with *believe this about themselves*. They see themselves as toxic because they expect to harm others with their knowledge of the hideousness of war—"if you knew what I know, it would fuck you up." Some feel this way because of the actual cruelty, violence, and coercion they have committed after returning from Vietnam. These veterans shun closeness with others, because they are certain that others will be harmed by the contact.

But while Odysseus' conscience was quite lethargic, but I can testify that some of the men I work with are profoundly troubled in their conscience by the harm they have done to others since returning to civilian life.<sup>21</sup> Many of my patients experience shame and remorse for how the lives of their wives, parents, and children have been deformed by the impact of their own psychological and moral injuries. This phenomenon of "secondary traumatization" in close relationships has been extensively studied and documented<sup>22</sup>—and the veterans themselves are vividly aware of it.

The *Odyssey's* particularly poignant example that Odysseus can never hold his mother in his arms again, or be held by her, can stand as an emblem for a large, varied category of losses.

How I longed

to embrace my mother's spirit, dead as she was!

Three times I rushed toward her, desperate to hold her, three times she fluttered through my fingers, sifting away like a shadow, dissolving like a dream, and each time the grief cut to the heart, sharper, yes, and I, I cried out to her . . .

"Mother—why not wait for me? How I long to hold you!"—  
(11:233ff, Fagles)

The poignancy and anguish of this scene is true to the experience of real combat veterans with PTSD. Both the original traumas of war and the wreckage caused by their psychological injuries have caused irretrievable losses of this magnitude.

#### IRRETRIEVABLE LOSSES

When one's closest comrade dies in combat, his death is permanent and irreversible. This painful truth needs no explanation. Indeed it rivets our attention to such a degree that many combat veterans and those who want to understand them often overlook the many losses that occur *after* the war has ended. These irretrievable losses take many forms.

Men that I work with have children they have not seen in twenty years, parents who died while they were estranged, or who have been estranged for all but the last few years since Vietnam. Many have shared the same domicile with their wives and children but have been utterly detached from them, living on a separate floor. The overwhelming sense of futility and waste: "For fifteen years I was completely *insane*, drinking and drugging and fucking people up, what do I got to show for it?" Our culture values occupational achievements almost to the exclusion of anything else, so it is not surprising that many of our patients have felt humiliated by their inability to be "successful" and prosperous. Others feel like the veteran whose words are an epigraph to the Introduction—"My regret is wasting the whole of my productive adult life as a lone wolf." He feels he has missed the sense of belonging, recognition, and mutual appreciation that his talents and hard work should have earned him. He has been reasonably successful in his profession, but he believes he is not nearly as successful as he would have been if he could trust other people enough to collaborate with them—instead of always being a "lone wolf." A lone wolf feels at home nowhere.

Odysseus' mother's death while he was absent is but one way to lose a mother. Others are no less painful: One of my patients, a marine veteran

whose dignity and "command presence" are an important contribution to the veteran community—I tease him about being the colonel of the Southie [South Boston] Marine Regiment—returned home after his service in Vietnam in a state of boiling anger, overwhelmed by suffocating grief at so many killed and the sense that all ideas of "what's right" had been utterly discredited. He drank heavily and fell in with—or sought out—"bad company." He says he was in his room in the family home and overheard his mother say, "That's not my [his name]." He says, "I was so mad, I just walked out of the house and didn't come back for ten years." During those ten years he did a lot of harm to himself and to others. And those ten years are irretrievable.

Lawrence Tritle, a Vietnam veteran and professor of history at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, recounts the following story, which links the haunting presence of the dead and the loss of a mother:

This grip of the dead on the living was related to me . . . by Emma, the mother of a Vietnam combat veteran. She told me of talking with her son soon after his return from Vietnam, where he had once been the sole survivor of his ambushed platoon. As he recounted one horrific incident after another, sometimes confessing his own brutalities, Emma thought to herself, "This isn't my son." As he continued his confessions, she began to look for birthmarks and childhood scars, to prove to herself that the man sitting before her was an impostor. Quickly her son sensed what she was doing and, like many another veteran, "went off" as he realized that his own mother did not believe or trust him.<sup>28</sup>

Odysseus was absent from home for twenty years. Ten of those were the Trojan War itself. The remaining ten years were . . . what? The only account we have of them is Odysseus' fabulous tales told to the Phaeacian courtiers in Books 9–12. Might they have been ten years at home, but not home? Ten years of wildness, drinking, drugging, living on the edge, violence, sex addiction, not-so-petty crime, and of "bunkering in," becoming unapproachable and withdrawn? If so, would not Odysseus have been just as "absent" a son to Anticleia, just as "absent" a husband to Penelope, and "absent" a father to Telemachus as if he still had been overseas? Could not these ten years have been told in metaphor as the very same story told in the *Odyssey*?

## What Was the Sirens' Song?

## Truth As Deadly Addiction

[After discharge in 1971] I spent a great deal of time in my old stomping grounds, Oceanside, home of Camp Pendleton Marine Base. . . . I rarely let on that I was a vet. I learned to enjoy hearing the stories told by vets to (what they thought) was a non-vet. A whole new genre emerged. . . .

When I entered the college classrooms in 1977, I met Vvets attending school under the GI Bill. Again, I kept a low profile. I can't believe Vvets say they couldn't talk about the war. That's all they talked about. It seemed that no matter what the subject being discussed, some clown in a boonie hat would throw his shit digger up in the air and somehow make a tie-in to the war. "Excuse me professor, but I was in the Nam, and I can assure you that you don't need a microscope to see amoeba. In the Delta, two of 'em carried off my buddy."

—George "Sonny" Hoffman, "The War Story"

In the years I have been working on *Odysseus in America*, I have asked many people who claimed to have read and loved the *Odyssey* if they remembered what the Sirens were singing about. With the exception of professional classicists, I have never received a correct answer. The overwhelming majority of people incorrectly recall that their song was about sex,<sup>2</sup> with a smaller number saying it was about what was going on at home in Ithaca. Here, in Homer's words, is the answer:

Come this way, honored Odysseus, great glory of the [Greeks],  
 . . . so that you can listen here to our singing:

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for no one else has ever sailed past this place in his black ship  
 until he has listened to the honey-sweet voice . . .  
*for we know everything that the [Greeks] and Trojans  
 did and suffered in wide Troy. . . .*

Over all the generous earth we know everything that happens.  
 (12:184ff, orig. Pucci, trans. <sup>3</sup>, emphasis added)

The Sirens know the complete and final truth about what happened in the Trojan War! It is the *complete truth* that trapped Trojan War veterans on their way home like bees in syrup, and they died. Circe's advance warning about this peril allows Odysseus to stop the ears of his crew with wax and sail safely by:

. . . woe to the innocent who hears that sound!  
 He will not see his lady nor his children  
 in joy, crowding about him, home from [war];  
 the [Sirens] will sing his mind away  
 on their sweet meadow lolling. There are bones  
 of dead men rotting in a pile beside them  
 and flayed skins shrivel around the spot.  
 (12:50ff, Fitzgerald)

In the language of metaphor, Homer shows us that returning veterans face a characteristic peril, a risk of dying from the obsession to know the complete and final truth of what they and the enemy did and suffered in their war and why. In part, this may be another expression of the visceral commandment to keep faith with the dead. Complete and final truth is an unachievable, toxic quest, which is different from the quest to create meaning for one's experience in a coherent narrative. Veterans can and do achieve the latter.

Linc is a marine veteran of the Vietnam War, who has large gaps in his memory of what happened to his company and what they did during the summer-fall offensive of 1969. For several years—he has come out of it now—his life was organized around trips to the Marine Corps historical archives in Washington, D.C. He photocopied every After Action Report and every entry of the Company

Phaeacian Court  
 Raid on Ismarus  
 Lotus Land  
 Cyclops  
 King of the Winds  
 Deadly Fiord  
 Circe  
 Among the Dead  
 > Sirens  
 Scylla and Charybdis  
 Sun God's Cattle  
 Whirlpool  
 Calypso  
 At Home, Ithaca

Diary and Battalion Diary for his unit in the period in question. I can recall spans of months during which he came and went from the Clinic with a gym bag containing the photocopies, afraid to look at them, but unable to part with them even temporarily. He feared what he would find there, things that would inflame his rage, grief, or guilt to unmanageable intensity—but paradoxically, he was also terrified that he would discover that the things he did remember “for sure” were untrue. What if the marine who had died “for” him when the two had exchanged jobs at the last moment had actually died on a different day in different circumstances?

Linc no longer carries his gym bag of historical “truth” with him. He and his individual therapist slowly and patiently worked through its contents. It contained no disorienting surprises; he learned that he could master his emotions.

Nothing is simple, of course. Other things have contributed to his recovery. Linc’s trips to obtain Marine Corps records coincided with visits that veterans in our program made to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the Wall. In the four years I had known him as a patient prior to this period of two or three years in which trips to the Wall and examination of records took place, he had inhabited only a very few moods or emotions. Sarcasm, cynicism, rage—these were easy and frequent when in the Clinic. Apathy, just staring into space, is how he described his mood at home. Alternations between apathy and rage were the rhythms of his life at the beginning of his participation in our program. But after a few months of contact with the other veterans, a new mood became more and more prevalent: worry about his physical health. Extensive medical workups and careful investigation of these worries failed to reassure him, and he would respond to any “How’s things?” with a repetitive droning recitation of his ailments. Some mental health professionals would deny that this was “progress,” calling it symptom substitution with hypochondria, but we defined it for ourselves and him as progress, if only because during the decades before he came to the VA, he was a severe, apparently intractable alcoholic—a dilapidated, sleeping-in-the-gutter drunk. This new preoccupation with bodily health was at least basic self-care. While never noted for his sense of humor, he was able to take some teasing about his bodily preoccupations. Even while I paid strict attention to his medical complaints, and referred him for medical evaluation to other physicians within the VA, I began to welcome his recitations of symptoms as musical performances, as “organ recitals,” and he could see the humor in my response.

I conduct a monthly wellness and preventive medicine session with the veterans in our program. They are now in their fifties, never having

expected to live to twenty-five! Past thirty? Past forty? “Neva happen!” When the future isn’t real, why take care of your body? As one veteran put it, “This is the first time I have something to live for, and now—aw, shit!—I’m old and I’m gonna get sick before I can enjoy it.” Transient but intense preoccupation with illness, what seems like hypochondria, is partly the utter newness of paying attention to body sensations that previously were numbed out or stoically ignored. It is as though all of the suppressed health worries of thirty years and what came to others as a gradual awareness of the threats of aging hit them all at once. Another veteran said, “After so many years of not feeling anything, this sucks!” Another, who spent many years in abandoned drugging and drinking, now lives in terror of irreversible harm he might have done to his organs, problems that have not yet announced themselves. “When you expect to be dead by next week, you just don’t think about what you shoot in your vein or put down your throat,” said this other veteran. Linc had been a *very* severe alcoholic, so his constant preoccupation with the state of his bodily organs was not entirely irrational or neurotic.

Photos of Linc from his first trip to the Wall show emotions that he had never allowed. One photo shows his face as a mask of sorrow and grief—emotions he never gave voice to in the Clinic. Another shows him with a grin so big even his eyes are smiling. I had never seen this smile in the years I had worked with him, only an occasional wry, cynical, knowing, they-may-be-trying-to-fuck-me-over-but-I’m-smarter smirk. Apparently the human heart works this way: shut down the pain of grief and you lose the capacity for joy as well. Helen’s “anodyne, mild magic of forgetfulness,” seems quite sinister in this light.

#### THE LANGUAGE OF TIMES THAT MAKE A WORLD

As often with great poetry, language carries much that cannot be reduced to the factual or narrative content of the words. Because Homer sang in a special dialect of archaic Greek, we need the help of scholars to “hear” it. The language of the Sirens episode in *Odysseus’* yarn does more than reinforce the content—the potentially life-sapping snare of obsession with finding the absolute, complete, and final truth—it draws our attention to one aspect of the workings of that obsession. The “voice” of the Sirens, scholars tell us, is the “voice” of the *Iliad*,<sup>4</sup> the voice of a wartime past experienced as more real and meaningful than the present. One veteran speaks of his most painful war memories as “sacred stuff.”

There is also a pleasurable<sup>5</sup> side to the use of jargon, speech rhythms,

tones of voice that combat veterans take in talking to each other about their experiences. Civilian friends and family members may be by turns bewildered, amazed, bored, and then annoyed by veterans' ability to talk with each other for hours on end about details of weapons that they used, of the contents and texture of different C rations. This is what it sounds like: You never carried a Thumper? I once used a Willy Peter round to fire up a hooch / Bull-sheet, there wasn't no Willy Peter<sup>6</sup> for the Thumper, you musta put a flare into it, you fucking turkey / Ever see a belt-fed Thumper? That musta been something / Yeah, on our boats it was hand-cranked, but I heard they were putting the automatic ones on the boats, too, but I never saw one, I think they were trying to use the same kind as on the Cobras, but like I said, I never saw one . . . and on, and on.

The speech rhythms, the jargon, the technical minutiae are sometimes the only doorway a veteran finds into the rooms full of pain that they carry: Farmer, the veteran of the brown water Navy we met above in Chapter 6, once spoke at length in group therapy about the 20mm cannon in the turret of his boat. This powerful weapon helped Farmer and his comrades survive. The cannon had originally been designed as a World War II aircraft dogfighting and ground attack weapon, to function in the well-cooled setting of an aircraft in flight (Years later he and I stood silently together, in the World War II museum in the Marine base at Quantico, staring at a display of this weapon and the entire aircraft in which it had been so successfully used.)

However, the riverine model could also kill or maim the sailor using it. These guns were not suited to steamy tropical rivers where they overheated and jammed. When they jammed, they had to be cleared by hand by the gunner in the turret. The heat of the gun barrel added to the extreme environmental heat, for which the ammunition had never been designed, causing jammed rounds to "cook off," i.e., to explode. A friend of Farmer's named \_\_\_\_\_, "the nicest guy in the whole division," had requested transfer from the flamethrower on his boat to the 20mm cannon, because the flame weapon horrified him.

Farmer's personal log notes the visit of Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird around Christmas. A weapons demonstration—a show—was put on for the secretary, during which \_\_\_\_\_'s cannon jammed. He cleared the weapon, and as he held the round up to throw it out the turret hatch, it exploded, blowing all the fingers off his right hand and destroying the right side of his face and right eye. Farmer carried this needless waste in his belly like something curdled, until he was able to talk about it to his

brother veterans. The language of weapons, of the military setting, was his doorway into the traumatic material of his friend's maiming, and his sense of betrayal that it was not in battle against the enemy, but as part of a show for a dignitary.

#### MEMORY UNCONNECTED TO COMMUNITY

One of the good things that marine veteran Linc did for himself (with our vigorous encouragement) was to start attending \_\_\_\_\_ Marine Division Association reunions, attempting to find people from his unit. He has become progressively more engaged with the unit association. The social nourishment it gives him has eroded much of his habitual bitterness and expanded the scope of his life. The absolute truth of the Trojan War that the Sirens sang was utterly detached from any community that remembers and retells it. Instead of nourishing and sustaining, it killed—much like crack cocaine sometimes kills—by starvation.

One source of obsessive attraction to the Sirens could be their appeal to the veteran's vanity. Certainly, the Sirens are blowing smoke when they address Odysseus as the "great glory of the [Greeks]." At this point after the fall of Troy, and considering how and why Troy fell, Odysseus certainly deserves this greeting. But the flattery of it is what scholars Frederick Ahl and Hanna Roisman have in mind when they write that the seductive power of the Sirens' song was "the musical reenactment of his own past, his own self, his own reflection, his own narcissism."<sup>7</sup> However, another scholar, Pietro Pucci, offers a different slant, which I have sometimes heard confirmed in the veterans' words. Pucci writes: "The Siren's invitation and promise . . . is 'written' in strictly Iliadic diction. . . . The paralyzing effects . . . [are] because their song binds its listeners obsessively to the fascination of death."<sup>8</sup>

I have heard a marine veteran of Vietnam say, "I never expected to come home alive. We were marines. Marines die. That's what we do. I *think I failed*." What this marine veteran refers to is the sacrificial cult of the "beautiful death" that is part of the Marine Corps culture. Marines give their lives willingly, it says, so that the battle and the war can be won quickly, sparing so many more lives that would be lost in a slow slugging match of attrition. In some settings, especially in wartime, this has blurred over into a cult of death, akin to Japanese *bushido*. Some readers of the *Iliad* come away with the idea that it is the original militaristic document praising the "beautiful death" of the hero in battle and thus praising war

itself, totally missing its antiwar, tragic message.<sup>9</sup> But as a portrait of how the story of a war can "bind its [veteran] listeners obsessively to the fascination of death," Professor Pucci's observation is on the mark.

#### TOTAL CERTAINTY IS JUST AS DAMAGING

Linc's obsession was to *find* the absolute, complete, and final truth. He did not find it. But he now has his own narrative, his own understanding of what he was part of. He is intensely interested when he meets someone from his company who remembers something he has forgotten or never knew or even contradicts some aspect of his own narrative. His life-sapping obsession to fill a void of forgotten experience with absolute truth has moderated to a life-sustaining sense of belonging to a community with a meaningful history, his friends in the——Marine Division Association. Human memory is physical in the brain, psychological, social, and cultural—it is all of these things at every moment.

The Greek word for truth, *alētheia*, means literally that which is unforgotten (*a*—not + *lēthe*—forgetting). Homer's near contemporary Hesiod represents *Lēthe* as a divine personification of forgetfulness. The word *lēthe* appears at *Iliad* 2:33 meaning forgetfulness, but never appears as a goddess or a river. Remembering that Odysseus has just come from Hades when he encounters the Sirens, we can see an intriguing interpretation—he just escaped the land of Death and its river *Lēthe* and the very next mortal danger he faces is *alētheia* so seductive he risks death hearing it. First he escapes forgetfulness and then he escapes its opposite, absolute truth. We do not know if Homer believed *Lēthe* was around Hades, as is familiar to us from Plato's *Republic*,<sup>10</sup> hundreds of years after Homer, and from Milton's geography of Hell in *Paradise Lost*: "Lēthe the River of Oblivion."<sup>11</sup> According to a study by the French scholar Marcel Detienne, called *The Masters of Truth in Archaic Greece*, "*Alētheia* is . . . structured around the major opposition between memory and oblivion."<sup>12</sup> Particular types of men—the seer, the bard, and the "king of justice"—were "masters of truth." Curiously, the Sirens only "speak of 'knowing,'" as scholar Charles Segal has observed, never "of 'memory' or of remembering."<sup>13</sup>

This is no small distinction, because much still hinges today upon whose understanding of the war and its consequences becomes generally accepted Truth. Who are the masters of truth on the Vietnam War? This war lies in our midst like a dead elephant being torn apart by hyenas—

who then fight viciously among themselves for control of the nutrient-rich carcass.

The modern world has its own masters of truth, some of them very public and visible, like judges and broadcast media commentators. Others are faceless, anonymous bureaucrats who "adjudicate"<sup>14</sup> veterans' disability claims.

Doc, both a conventional nickname for a medic and here a pseudonym, was one of two suicides "on my watch" during the fourteen years I have been the psychiatrist for our specialized intensive outpatient treatment program for Vietnam combat veterans with PTSD.

Doc volunteered for the U.S. Army in 1964, and trained at Fort Sam Houston as a medical corpsman. He then served in Germany and upon reenlistment in 1967 volunteered for duty in Vietnam. Doc arrived in Vietnam in June 1967, and was assigned to the Military Assistance Command as a medical adviser, based in a military compound in Hue City. The five-man advisory unit traveled with an ARVN (South Vietnamese Army) unit up and down Highway 1 as far as the DMZ in the north and Phu Loc in the south. These movements along Highway 1 invited repeated ambushes, mortar attacks, and mine explosions. The American advisory unit became extremely close-knit, because they found that in a firefight the ARVN abandoned them and that they could only rely on themselves. During one such ambush four of the five men on the team were hit, two died immediately and two survived, but Doc, the only one not hit, felt then and until he killed himself, that he should have kept his two dead buddies alive.

The Tet Offensive started in Hue City on January 31, 1968, with heavy rocket and mortar barrages followed by ground assaults on their compound within the city. At first light the American soldiers in the compound could see numerous Viet Cong and NVA (North Vietnamese Army) flags surrounding it. The next six days, surrounded and cut off, they went utterly without sleep under constant rocket and mortar bombardment and repeated ground assault. The incoming rounds formed the content of Doc's hallucinatory reliving experiences ("flashbacks"), triggered by firecrackers or other sharp loud noises. Three of the five U.S. medics in the compound were killed, two of them close friends. Doc recalled feeling overwhelmed by the number of casualties, and his inability to evacuate them. In particular, he was torn up by the number who died under his care, who would have lived had it been possible to evacuate them.

During the six days of encirclement, before the Americans in the compound were relieved by the marines, an episode happened that



formed the basis of the veteran's most frequent repetitive traumatic dream: He was standing next to the captain, when within a second both he and the captain were hit by snipers' bullets. Both went down together. The side of the captain's neck was ripped open and the blood spurted in Doc's face and drenched his shirt. Though wounded himself (he received the Purple Heart for this occasion), Doc carried on his duties as a medic. When the marines broke through, he refused to be evacuated and accompanied a Marine unit whose medic had been killed. This led to twelve days of house-to-house combat as the marines retook the city. There were heavy marine casualties, to whom Doc ministered under fire. He was present at the discovery of mass graves of those executed by the VC and NVA. These masses of dead and mutilated bodies also figure in his repetitive nightmares.

Doc was honored with two Bronze Stars, with the Vietnamese Cross for Gallantry, and the Army Commendation Medal for Valor, in addition to receiving a Purple Heart and the Combat Medic Badge.

Prior to Vietnam, Doc didn't drink and had never experimented with drugs, but after Tet, while still in the service, he became a heavy drinker and a steady user of marijuana and heroin to shut out grief and suppress flashbacks and nightmares. When he was honorably discharged from the Army in June 1969, he was heavily addicted to alcohol and heroin.

After discharge, Doc drifted from one menial job to another, holding and losing over fifty in twenty years. He married three times, each marriage ending because of PTSD and substance abuse. His self-medication of PTSD with alcohol, heroin, and then IV cocaine was partially successful, especially in controlling nightmares and flashbacks. Starting in 1975, he repeatedly sought treatment, with numerous hospitalizations and detox. On every occasion, withdrawal from alcohol and drugs was followed by a resurgence of PTSD symptoms. After completion of the most recent hospital drug abuse treatment, starting in May of 1988, he was transferred to a psychiatric unit, because of reemergence of PTSD symptoms. Previously he had been discharged with no PTSD treatment, only further drug abuse treatment. He was discharged from the psychiatric ward to a halfway house and referred to our specialized outpatient combat PTSD program. Following this final hospital admission Doc remained sober and "clean" for the next three years, until a single, fatal heroin overdose, shortly after his claim for a disability pension for combat PTSD was rejected.

The coroner signed off the overdose death as accidental, but I believe Doc was too sophisticated, both as a heroin addict and as a paramedic, not

to know that he had lost his drug tolerance during the long period of abstinence. His "normal" dose as a hard-core, daily IV heroin addict was a lethal dose to the recovered addict without a tolerance. I believe he intentionally killed himself in despair, anger, and humiliation after the value of his service was—in his eyes—"officially" rejected by the VA.

The masters of truth in the government bureaucracy followed "objective" procedures and observed "objective" criteria that led them to conclude that he had been disabled by his own "willful misconduct" in drug and alcohol abuse, not by psychological injury in the line of duty in service to his country and fellow soldiers. Whereas Linc died figuratively for a few years in quest of the absolute truth, Doc literally died by his own hand in response to what he apparently experienced as others' possession of the absolute truth—that his war service had not injured him, only his own misbehavior. He was humiliated and dishonored by the official action. The "masters of truth" had found him unworthy.

German veterans after defeat in World War I, who inhabited the absolute truth of the "*Dolchstoß von hinten*"—the "stab in the back" by traitors inside the government and the army—were willing to kill someone who said that Germany had been beaten fair and square by the British, French, and their late-coming allies, the Americans. They felt personally attacked and dishonored by the suggestion that they had been bested, rather than betrayed.<sup>15</sup>

Dishonor arouses the desire to kill—self or others, sometimes both. Honor and dishonor are social processes, which declares "the truth" of a person's or group's worth. What kind of truth is it that induces an addict's craving for it when absent, as if for cocaine, and produces an arrogant, violent, paranoid state when possessed? I wish I could answer this question. It goes to the heart of extremist religious and political movements. We can recognize this lethal intoxication with absolute truth in Timothy McVeigh, Osama bin Laden, and Jewish law student Yigal Amin, the assassin of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. Veterans' tragic experiences render their own reckonings of ultimate truth and worth so very hard for them and so explosive. People will kill for it, and will die for it, as the metaphor of the bodies moldering in the Sirens' meadow shows.

## Scylla and Charybdis:

### Dangers Up, Down, and Sideways

Recall that Odysseus vowed to return to Circe's island to give Elpenor a proper burial. Circe wines and dines the crew and pulls Odysseus aside to give him more sailing instructions. She tells him about the Sirens' trap, and how to waltz past it using wax earplugs. Then she warns him of the narrow strait beyond: on the left are breakers, hull-tearing rocks, and a fearsome whirlpool called Charybdis; on the right is a sheer cliff, home to the cave-dwelling six-headed monster Scylla. The two deadly hazards are "side-by-side, an arrow-shot apart"<sup>1</sup> across the strait. She advises him to make a dash for it under Scylla's lair, instead of losing the whole ship in the whirlpool. If he makes it through the strait, the next landfall is the sun god's cattle ranch on the island of Thrinacia. She repeats the warning

- Phaeacian Court
- Raid on Ismarus
- Lotus Land
- Cyclops
- King of the Winds
- Deadly Flord
- Circe
- Among the Dead
- Sirens
- **Scylla and Charybdis**
- Sun God's Cattle
- Whirlpool
- Calypso
- At Home, Ithaca

Teiresias had given Odysseus in the Underworld not to touch the god's fat beef cattle.

Americans in Vietnam fought against the "finest light infantry in the world."<sup>2</sup> A part of what made them the finest was their mastery—even within their limited technologies and resources—of what is known as "combined arms." This is the military competence and mental discipline to create a Scylla and Charybdis for the enemy, and doing it so fast or so unpredictably that the enemy loses his grip on the situation and freezes or panics and the attacked unit comes apart. It's no exaggeration to say that persistent, skillful use of combined arms drives the enemy insane. An

American column of half-tracks on a road encounters mines—slow down and sweep the mines!—and at the same time a barrage of rocket-propelled grenades—speed through the killing zone as fast as you can! These two tactical responses, slowing down and speeding up, are incompatible, and both bad, Scylla and Charybdis. American infantry patrols encountered ambush sites where the vegetation on either side of the trail was prepared with punji stakes—concealed needle-sharp bamboo or metal stakes set in the ground or wooden planks pointing up—for the soldiers or marines to impale themselves on when they dove for cover to avoid rifle fire from their front. Scylla and Charybdis.

Some veterans I work with never allow themselves a moment of satisfied relaxation after successfully meeting any challenge, such as making the car payments, or fixing a burst washing machine hose, because, they say, there is always something more they have to prepare themselves to meet. Here again is the persistence into civilian life of adaptations that allowed the veteran to survive in battle.

As usual, Homer's gold is to be mined from details of the text. Circe counsels Odysseus—

Hug Scylla's crag—sail on past her—top speed!  
Better by far to lose six men and keep your ship  
Than lose your entire crew.

(12.118f, Fagles)

Odysseus bridle at this coward's dash and asks her if he can't just steer away from the whirlpool and fight off the monster. To this she replies—

Must you have battle in your heart forever?  
The bloody toil of combat? Old Contender,  
will you not yield to the immortal gods?  
That nightmare cannot die, being eternal  
Evel itself—horror, and pain, and chaos;  
there is no fighting her . . .  
all that awaits is flight.  
*Lose headway there*

. . . *while you break out arms,*  
and she'll swoop over you . . .  
taking one man for every gullet.

(12.136–45, Fitzgerald; emphasis added)

Circe tells Odysseus that apart from headlong flight, there is no chance of surviving an encounter with “eternal Evil itself.” She asks him if he must have battle in his heart forever, responding to *every* danger that the world presents with resort to heroic feats of arms. Even though Odysseus responds to her advice—remember, she is a minor goddess and knows what she’s talking about—with a salute and a “Yes, Ma’am,” when he actually reaches the spot, he ignores her advice. His answer to her question whether he’ll have battle in his heart forever is—yes. This quotation, along with Circe’s perceptive picture of the veteran’s “haggard spirit,” brings together so many elements of combat PTSD—battle forever, nightmare, eternal evil, the sense of helplessness—that I am tempted to smirk like the cat that swallowed the canary. After this, how can anyone *not* see the connection with combat veterans?

But like Odysseus, I go forward . . . Odysseus reaches the narrows,

*But now I cleared my mind of Circe’s orders—  
Cramping my style, urging me not to arm at all.  
I donned my heroic armor.*

Now wailing in fear, we rowed up these straits,  
Scylla to starboard, dreaded Charybdis off to port. . . .

When she<sup>3</sup> swallowed the sea surge down her gaping maw  
the whole abyss lay bare and the rocks around her roared. . . .

bedrock showed down deep, boiling  
black with sand—  
and ashen terror gripped the men.

But now, fearing death, all eyes fixed on Charybdis—  
now Scylla snatched six men from our hollow ship.

(12:245ff; Fagles, emphasis added)

Odysseus is the only one who knows the danger of Scylla, having decided not to mention her to his men. This means that he alone can be on the lookout against her sudden appearance. But along with everyone else on board he becomes riveted by the sucking vortex below and to the left and misses Scylla’s first attack. Odysseus only turns in time to see six of his crewmen drawn upward, writhing like hooked fish at the ends of the monster’s six long necks.

The poet throws dangers at this terrified crew from left and right, above and below. Veterans have described their own need to “wail in fear” when ambushed in a particularly skillful way, using combined arms: mor-

tars and grenades from above, mines and punji stakes below, and automatic fire from the side and front. I’ve already commented above in Chapter 7 on some veterans’ expectancy of attack from any direction, or as with Odysseus’ ship, *all* directions.

As a metaphor for some combat veterans’ response to the civilian world, this episode has a number of unfortunate echoes. Various powers in the civilian world—the police, the IRS, an employer’s personnel department, the Department of Social Services, the Social Security Administration, the Veterans Administration, the gas company, the electric company, the telephone company, the Department of Motor Vehicles, the criminal courts, the divorce courts, the bank that financed the pickup, the company that insured it, the agency that financed the college loan, the collection agency, the ex-wife’s lawyer—these all seem to have the capacity to swoop out of the sky and snatch the veteran, writhing, and carry him to some dark place to devour him. In such a state of vulnerability, they often want to do what Odysseus did, to arm themselves and fight the foe the only way they know how. Direct, courageous, armed action that we associate with military heroism is wildly out of place. There is literally no place for it.<sup>4</sup>

Scholars have debated whether six more of his men die horrible deaths because Odysseus cannot take Circe’s instruction, or whether the first six were unavoidable. Her advice runs counter to *his* way of doing things.<sup>5</sup> Does he risk his life for them when he dons his armor, or risk *their* lives? Possibly he will lose six *no matter what* he does (12:109f, orig.). Scholar Alfred Heubeck clucks his tongue at Odysseus as if to say, “heroes will be heroes” —

His heroic stature is no more diminished by his ignoring of a warning . . . than by his clever tactics towards his own men [i.e., keeping them in the dark]. Ignoring all that he knows of [Scylla], Odysseus attempts the impossible and foolish because it is also the heroic. He must be true to his own nature, and, faced with a hopeless situation, nevertheless risks his own life for the sake of his men.

The heroic gesture of arming against an [unpreventable disaster] in a world where there is no place for the heroic, is here almost grotesque, but it also vividly illustrates the tragedy of the hero with his limited outlook.<sup>6</sup>