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Two Poems

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Crazy

As to when exactly Penelope knew
Odysseus was come home, people differ.
Did she decode her husband in the ragged beggar
and set the bow contest? Did she hear, contra Homer,
the ancient nurse gasp at his scar? What steadied her
to see his bet and bluff her bridal chamber?
I say it's after the slaughter and just before

he proves himself to be the one who built and knows
that bed: the moment they bicker, call each other
daimoniê. It is an odd apostrophe
you use if you're a baffled ancient Greek, baffled
by someone behaving so unreasonably
you cannot recognize them—a god, a daimon,
must be responsible. Between husband and wife,
a strange term of endearment, when endearment turns
estranged or strained. Alarm we could roughly translate:

Baby, don't be crazy. So far, he's convinced them all
but her. She keeps her distance once the blood's washed off
this man, anointed, looking good, and impatient.
Daimoniê! he says, and it's then she hears what
she cannot doubt—familiar lover's irritation.
His old *I can't believe you* voice makes her believe.
Daimoniê yourself, she says, and reels him in.

Myrmidons

Stepping off his ship, a young king
is recognized by the old
whose harbor and hills surround,
though the old king hasn't seen him
since the young king was a boy,
since the old king was young.

It can happen in these stories,
a demigodly prescience
or regal intuition
as to who, son of whom,
just entered the room, although
most faces' fame rode the world
through Rumor, that gardener
whose scattered seeds grow wild:

long tall tales of lustrous locks
tumbling down sculpted backs
or generous hefts of cleavage;
cheekbones to make any nymph weep
or suitor unsheathe his sword;
footfalls the dirt begs to feel.

Generic descriptions
prove ample and apt, as lovers
know as soon as they see each other,
as heroes pinpoint heroes
across battlefields, as a shield
depicts scenes whose details
are known by all who deal it blows.

Such powers of recognition
are displayed as often
as a wondrously complete lack:
a maiden shames the name of a goddess
who stands cloaked before her;
a woman's husband, gone for days
and in disguise, gains a private
audience in her chambers,

where she speaks of him to him
as gone; a divine mother advises
a half-mortal son, revealing
herself as she disappears,
and the human in him despairs,
grasps at the air that was her.

Some possess the gift to detect
that nothing is recognizable,
that some terrific change
has transfigured a place.
The young king, surveying
the island, asks the old,
Where are his boyhood friends?

The citizens who greeted him
are many and beautiful,
strong and dutiful, to be sure,
and gave him great pleasure to meet,
but the faces he expected? All
absent. The kingdom, different.

The old man tells of a ravaging
heaven-sent plague: the bodies
rotting through streets and forests
from a sickness so torturous
many hearts stopped still by their own
hands, rather than endure the horror.

As he was ready to end himself,
 the old king saw ants, thousands
 crawling on a sacred tree;
 he prayed to the king of gods and
 men that his people be restored
 to the number of that colony.

Then, antennae sank into sockets;
 hard shiny skin grew soft
 and olive-smooth; the sex of each
 creature manifested; hair streamed
 out from rounded skulls; mandibles
 shrank inward to mouths; two legs
 were lost, two turned to arms,
 and the last stood upright, shakily.

“Do you not see,” said the old king
 to the young, gesturing
 beyond the palace, “something
 of their former nature
 in the way they move—divested
 of instincts they still remember?”

“But I’ve loved them, these child-like
 denizens, since the moment
 of alteranimation,
 since they never doubted
 their reason for being.”
 The old and the young man talk
 of the young’s upcoming war,
 and before long, it is settled;
 the Myrmidons will serve.

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