

“Sing, Muse...”

With these words, a war fell silent. A hush fell over the clashing armies, sudden silence washing over the ruins of fallen Troy. A muted sound moved upon silence. Dust clouds undimmed as light poured into the dying mist. A glowing goddess pierced the shroud of untimely night. The Greeks and Trojans were unable to see her as she strode peacefully to her destination. Arrows flew serenely past her. A beautiful sound had guided her to the barbaric scene. A sound that was not heard, only felt. It was the soundless melody of sweet destiny.

The goddess had been waiting for these words since time immemorial it seemed, since the human mind's most ancient dawn. The goddess no longer held back her cosmic tears. Now it was time for her voice to arise. The discordant sound of bronze upon bronze reached her from afar. Blade clashed with blade, armor with armor. Every screech and tear were the strings of a lyre. Every shield, breastplate and armor were now cymbals sounded, no longer cacophony but symphony.

Bruised worlds collided. East versus West. Beauty and barbarity. Brevity and longevity. Lust and dust. Melody and tragedy. Sun and moon ran in circles. Near and far was any meaning at all. She heard a rhyme arise from a clash of worlds. The monstrous noise of war became music. Rivalry

became poetry.

Both the Greeks and Trojans had seen friend and foe fight for dear life. Each had suffered the loss of life and love. Each had known their part to the last letter. Each had spoken their last words with beautiful brevity. Only one man was seemingly unmoved by it all. And the war and everyone in it knew his name.

Achilles lay still and cold as a statue. He saw the dim stars shining, ephemeral dots winking in and out of existence. The parched starlight was now glittering diamond dust. Somewhere in the dimness of semi-consciousness, he saw a shrouded figure marching ceremoniously toward him. Destiny was a bride who moved discreetly in his mind's thieving night. Achilles had often seen it roaming the corridors of his memory, but he had never seen its face until now. And he knew why: he was dying. What he saw was as beautiful as it was terrifying. He would not be joining his fallen comrades, not yet. He would have to return to Troy and die a beautiful death.

Achilles briefly recalled seeing the unsightly blacksmith of Olympus forging his shield from molten metal, and he wondered how someone so ugly could have made something so beautiful. Achilles felt as though his tears were stilled by a frozen wind. And yet something moved inside him like a flickering flame, beneath pounding flesh and a cave of bone. His unfeeling heart began to feel.

Achilles recalled his earliest memory, the moment when his mother Thetis held him over the flame. The sea nymph had attempted to erase every last shred of his mortality. He had felt pain then, but sensation and emotion

had been the same to his infant self. It was the flesh around his heel that made this moment possible, the sole part of him that was mortal and untouched by the flame. Now emotion drifted away from sensation. In the moment before he became motionless, his heart moved for the first time. Death was the invader, but he bore no malice toward it. It was its own Trojan horse, imminent doom disguised as deliverance.

Achilles could finally feel. An arrow had struck his heel, and for the first time he felt emotion rather than sensation. It was not the physical pain of metal lodged inside his flesh that Achilles felt; it was his heart moving freely. His heart could feel emotion as his body became devoid of sensation. To feel was to be free, as if life greeted death before parting ways with the world. The invader was winning, but he could not have cared less. Rage and grief, sadness and joy, each formed the humble music of memory. Achilles looked up and saw the goddess. The mere sight of her halted the floodgates of fear. The world of anger inside Achilles became but a mild flutter of resentment.

The Muse sang a blissfully silent song. She mouthed words too unearthly to be heard. She gazed into the gloom that encircled Achilles' dying eyes. Achilles wondered if she was going to sing his song or if she already sang it and he was finally about to hear its glorious end. She felt the fullness of her voice at the same time that Achilles felt the last of his mortality bleed out from his wounded heel. The goddess and the demigod shared a knowing look as the darkness closed in. Words formed on her lips and drowned out the darkness for a brief, blissful moment.

The Best of Both Worlds

On the night Achilles was born, Thetis had felt his small hands pounding on the walls of her womb like drums of war. It was not the pangs of childbirth she felt; it was the swift-footed rhythms of her war-like son. The sight of the brawny child had caused her to laugh away her tears. The child pummeled the air with balled fists, and her childbearing sorrow had turned to laughing tears. But Peleus was not pleased. The infant lay nestled in her maternal embrace, but all the king felt was smoldering resentment. Achilles' mortal flesh would have to burn. Thetis said that Achilles would live forever even if the king thought *never*.

Peleus knew that Thetis was unlike any other woman he had bedded. He also knew that she had beguiled men regardless of which mortal face she had put on to suit her caprices. But she had chosen Peleus for a reason. He would be the one to help her bear a child who would become the best of the Greeks. Not only that, the child would have a destiny forged in the fire of war. Peleus saw the liveliness of the infant, and all he could think

about was the sound of clashing worlds. The king and the sea nymph came from disparate streams of life, and Achilles would have to know where he truly belonged. The feud between Achilles' goddess mother and his mortal father would alter the course of his life.

King Peleus was well-versed in the art of seduction. Many women had entered the confines of his royal chambers. Thetis' disguise had been utterly elusive. She had disguised herself as a farmer's daughter. When she reverted to her usual form, the king could see that the beauty of her disguise somehow reflected her divine beauty. Peleus realized that whatever had happened between him and Thetis was a lie, but also that Achilles would prolong his legacy into posterity. The love the mortal and goddess had shared was a beautiful lie. Even as he gazed into the eyes of the nymph, he still saw the mortal face that spoke his name lovingly on her lips. The disguise lingered even as her true beauty shone through her unearthly frame.

Peleus was unsure if Achilles was an ugly truth or a beautiful lie. He would have to wait and see. Whatever would happen to Achilles would reflect on both the king and nymph. Death would trace the steps of his walking shadow. He smiled chidingly at Thetis' mention of Achilles' "destiny." Achilles would not live an ordinary life. That much was certain. But which path would he choose? Would he be the son of a king, or the son of a nymph whose only ambition was to sear his name onto the world's memory? Achilles would have to decide, but Thetis behaved as

though everything had been decided beforehand. *Destiny*, he thought, smiling ironically at the shadow of the woman who spoke the word.

When the night of their first encounter was over, Peleus knew who she really was. She was a silhouette engulfed by a sapphire inferno, a nymph who made the salt of the sea fester and boil. Now he saw hints of a raging blue sea in his son's eyes. Peleus remembered seeing a flicker of rage in the child's eyes, and he knew that he would grow into a creature of rage. Thetis let him know she would have her way, and there was no way for him to stop her. Achilles' mortal flesh would burn, and so would Peleus' resentment for the treacherous sea nymph.

On that fateful night, Peleus sat in his palace, admiring the lavishly adorned interior. He drank from a cup too large for his mouth. The wine nearly spilled out from the cup's edges, but Peleus brushed off the mere thought of wasting this precious wine. The king kept Achilles in a golden cradle in a flawlessly sealed chamber. The palace was impregnable, he thought. *Not even Thetis's large, swirling fist of sea water can break through the large doors.* Peleus thought about the way the goddess could bend the sea's depths to her will. *I am far beyond her reach here.*

Peleus heard the steady clatter of footfalls. Then he heard the sound of footsteps growing louder. At that moment, a servant entered his chambers and said, "My king, the daughter of the Old Man of the Sea has taken the child is on her way to the fire of Styx."

"What? How dare she?"

Peleus instantly left the throne room and ran like a madman. He knew

what Thetis was planning. He could already feel Thetis' gleeful smile tearing his inner world of calm to shreds. Within moments, Peleus burst through the doors and saw Thetis holding the baby Achilles over a bright flame. As soon as Thetis heard the doors bursting open, she lost all focus. Achilles' heel remained untouched by the flame that erased every other shred of mortality on his tiny, trembling body.

Peleus raised his hand. "What are you doing, Thetis? Have you gone mad? You wish to erase our son's mortality, but that cannot be. My son has a mortal destiny."

Thetis' eyes glowed like ember. "You cannot understand, foolish mortal that you are. Achilles deserves to be fully immortal. Do you wish for him to live a sordid mortal existence?"

Peleus approached her, and she rose while holding Achilles tightly. "Leave the child, Thetis!"

"He is my son also, and I will not let you deprive him of the glory he deserves."

"And what glory is that?"

"To become free from mortal flaws. You are the most flawed man I have ever known. I do not wish for Achilles to be anything like you."

Peleus shakes his head. "Give him to me...now!"

Thetis held Achilles even more tightly, and she rushed away from Peleus. At that moment, she failed to realize that Achilles' heel remained

mortal. The human flaw remained.

The Muse appears before Achilles, and then the nightmare of being forgotten becomes the dream of being forever remembered:

The song takes him away from home and into the unknown, from the billowing sails of the Greek ships to the sandy shores of Troy. It bears the likeness of a sound produced by Charon, who taught him the lyre. But it is not music he hears; he merely hears his life's moments flowing together. He recalls being given the shield forged by the blacksmith of Olympus. He sees his Ant-men, the Myrmidons, the ones who served him and fought by his side. He also sees Agamemnon's bejeweled fingers tearing and plundering the rich soil. He hears his life's melody in a single instant. And then he hears the echo of that melody reach far beyond the battlefield where he died. The melody reaches through the hills and valleys of a time far beyond his own.

In the short time he heard the melody, he saw the birth of a dream. And yet in that dream was death itself. As a child, Achilles had watched as a beautifully imperfect world had ceased to be beautifully untrue. A world of gold had spread endlessly around him, at the other side of which was immortality. He knew that even if the dreamer died, the dream would live on. His destiny was to die in Troy. In this tragedy, he heard his life's melody.

A world now faded with the last of the glowing embers, a world long sought for its gold. Achilles' heart could finally feel, but it knew not what. Was it love? The word carried a heavy load. He seemed unable to bear it.

He was full of emotion, and yet he felt himself to be utterly weightless, as if his golden armor was no more than a fluttering feather. The song carried him. Achilles knew that what he felt was deeper than flesh and bone. It was a sinking feeling. Its brevity matched its beauty. After all, he had once known love. It sank into his heart deeper than a blade could penetrate skin. There was pain, but also bliss. Emotion had entered his heart deeper than any sword could.

Even if a poisoned arrow had struck his heel, his once-estranged heart would have felt only joy. Achilles had fallen in love with an Amazon by looking at her face the moment before she died. Queen Penthesilea, leader of the tribe of Amazons, had faced Achilles on the battlefield of Troy. Achilles' blade had pierced her bowels, and her head had jerked sideways. Penthesilea's helmet had fallen off, and Achilles was struck by her beauty. That beauty sank into his heart deeper than a blade could tear through one's flesh. After his blade tore through her, her shocked eyes had shone with fierce clarity. His own eyes mirrored hers, but it was because love had entered his heart. The Amazon's hair had flowed on the air as though slowed by time and a gentle breeze. Achilles had felt love for the first time it seemed.

Achilles had held her head and wept at her wasted beauty. His heart moved for her when she ceased to move. This moment was as tragic as it was beautiful. As the war raged around him, Achilles had wept for Penthesilea's tragic beauty. He had studied every inch of her perfect face, and her lifeless eyes had gazed at him as though in recognition of his love.

Penthesilea's beauty was a spectacle for his bruised and belabored senses. It was an enigma waiting to be untangled, and for a moment he wondered whether he would end the war with a mere glance to do so. He wept and mourned for a love that became alive in a tragedy.

Penthesilea's face was unlike her battle-scarred body. It was flawless and pure, not even a broken nose or torn skin. It was unlike her hardened body. Its smooth, youthful skin betrayed any sign of war.

Beauty and death had danced fleetingly in the dying Amazon's eyes. Achilles thought he knew that look all too well. That love ended in the moment it began, not unlike his glorious life. *So tragic and so beautiful*, he had told himself then. Achilles had fallen in love with an Amazon in the moment before she died. That love began and ended in that moment, in the throes of death, in the heat of an overlong war. Now he saw a woman whose complexion also seemed beyond parallel.

When he saw the goddess now, he nearly felt the same way, but it was not love. It was the music in his heart finally finding its rhythm. It was his own heart reflecting before him.

Your life is as short as it is glorious, Achilles. The words echo as though from a bottomless well. And Achilles realizes that Destiny is the most beautiful song never heard. It is the rhyme of all unspoken rhymes, the echo of all muted echoes. It is the voice of all silenced voices. The song arising from the Muse's lips is as beautiful as it is short. In a

moment, the song has ended. And yet its melody remains...

Achilles' life has become her song. The voice of the Muse reaches his heart in the same way that water streams down an ice-capped mountain, crystal clear rivulets flowing in unison. Memory after memory forms his life's music, and the Muse has given it a melody. The Trojan war has given it flow and rhythm. From his birth to death, Destiny performs a fleeting dance. In the moment before total darkness, the song reaches his heart. Everything rhymes.

Achilles had always had two dreams. In one dream, he was a child meandering through a field of wheat that rippled like waves. The boy knew at once that he was dreaming. He felt as though life as he lived it beyond the dream was but a brief slumber. What the boy felt was the wakefulness of eternity. In the other dream, he was spared from a glorious death in Troy in order to live a long, but anonymous life. The aged Achilles was a forgotten relic. An ageless Helen of Troy visited him, an apparition that silently tugged at the trembling flame of his memory. The old man wished for her to take him back to the Trojan war, but each time she came and went like a whisper. Achilles covered his face with his blistered hands and wept.

One dream flowed enigmatically with the other. When the dreams merged, he would finally know who he was, and he would sleep a dreamless sleep. The most beautiful sleep is like death, he told himself, a sleep so deep it was devoid of pain.

Two worlds, precious and vast, stand at opposite sides. They are like twins with hands joined at birth. One moves when the other moves, hands organically and spasmodically entwined. Mortality and immortality stand side by side. Achilles thought that no one was there to behold his untimely demise apart from the gods. The goddess of poetry has watched the last moments of his life rhyme with what came before it.

She has the perfect memory. The roar of ancient seas, the rise and fall of kingdoms, the succession of one era to another like night and day, and the unimpeded march of time across vast deserts. It all comes back to her in an instant. The Muse of Epic Poetry flawlessly recalls the day that Achilles became mortally flawed. Achilles is the height of mortal perfection but also the epitome of mortal imperfection.

The goddess can see his dimmed figure outlined against the backdrop of her divine memory. Then the moment she appeared before him unfolds again, told and retold through the matchless lens of her memory. It all unfolds as though for the first time...

“Sing, Muse.” The voice reached across time, greeting her ears and heart in an instant. The fallen kingdom became a tale now, and she was going to be the one who would help to tell it.

Time, the teller of tales, allowed the Trojan war to rage inside her divine memory. Sounds and images invaded the confines of her far-reaching mind. The Muse of Epic Poetry felt that her celestial heart

was under siege. But then she realized that something within her began to flow freely. The memory of the war would live on. She knew this. She was the one who would help the poet sing his tale. Without her, the world would never know.

Inevitability had cast its shroud over mighty and illustrious men. The goddess could almost feel their desire to be remembered. Deep inside her, silence slowly became sound. Flames of longing spread and became layered upon her elusive core. Then the war in its entirety unspooled before her. Everything unfolded as though in the present. She was the sole spectator of this grim spectacle. The silhouetted Trojan horse, emptied of all its deception, stood still and gazed lifelessly into the fiery remnants of war. Human remains lay scattered, smoke circling above them like birds of carrion. Horses galloped furiously deep into the horizon. The flame that devoured Troy seemed to be self-replenishing. But then the fire began to relent. Troy's glory faded with the last of the glowing embers.

A golden world had been reduced to ashes, but its memory stood tall inside her. It unfolded second by second, minute by minute. But it also moved like a receding ocean, reaching for the shore of her memory before retreating. Wave after wave carried images, which then unrolled into sound. One moment Troy shone in all its splendor while the next it was ablaze in the war's aftermath. It was memory striving for the slightest semblance of flow and rhythm.

Calliope knew that she would have to turn this memory into music. Her voice remained deep inside her, waiting to emerge. She knew that

every image in her memory would roll into words on her quivering lips. It would become a song.

It was only moments ago that she heard the call of the poet seeking inspiration from her. The words of the poet ushered forth the memory of Troy. But now a rhyme was needed. She steadied herself and tried to sing, but only formless syllables arose from her honeyed lips.

She dreaded this silence. No mellifluous sound emerged from her once-vibrant chords. There were no epic rhythms traversing deep silences. Before she realized it, the other Muses had gathered around her. The eight Muses that surrounded her watch her in stunned silence, their lips pursed with half- amusement.

A wordless rhythm flowed on their lips. Was it dismay? Was it disappointment? The Muses convened to witness her act of responding to the call of the poet. Their whispers were loud enough to cast a darker shadow of doubt on her.

Clio, the Muse of history, directed her gaze at her but then withdrew her piercing stare. Erato, the Muse of love poetry, looked right through her and glimpsed the bright flame inside her crystal heart. She recognized the deepest yearning inside her, but she knew that her voice remained buried in her heart.

“How can you possibly sing, Calliope? Your voice fails to rhyme with what is in your heart.”

Euterpe, the Muse of music, gazed upon her but only saw a sound

bound to silence. “Your voice fails to move as freely as your heart. One must move with the other. They must both flow as freely as music.”

The rest of the Muses looked upon her in silence, their eyes drifting right through her and diminishing her. “She is not ready,” their eyes and inner voices were saying.

Each pair of celestial eyes probed every recess of her mind and heart, her most complicated thought and most simple desire. They could see that her desire to sing failed to match her ability to sing, their eyes half-formed mirrors of recognition.

Calliope wandered through the halls of her immortal memory. She found herself climbing a large marble staircase. The steps seemed endless as they reached higher and higher. She climbed the last of the marble steps and observed a majestic expanse. Then a statue swam imperceptibly into her view. A statue of herself. Calliope felt her voice dying in her throat, and the epic poem arising from it pulled back invisibly from the distance it has trod.

The book of inspiration she held now appeared largely before her eyes, an entity springing to life. Calliope saw various moments from history. The book opened and the pages flipped endlessly. The images moved with blinding speed. The pages moved so quickly that all her inspiration seemed to fade. Calliope began to sing, but her voice was no more. A broken marble visage greeted her eyes. Calliope recognized the face as her own. She saw the statue of herself once more, and she realized

that her voice was trapped underneath. Her voice remained unheard, untextured by time. She was frozen in her own heart's secret infinity. *Sing, Muse.* But her own voice faltered in its epic reply. She yearned for her voice to come out. But she had to wait. She knew it.

Her slender frame moved across the room like a whisper in the wind. This familiarity became even more familiar. Her mind raced. The marble statue's fragmented cheek struck her elusive core, and then her sight drifted beyond the flawed curvature to focus on the marble eyes. She saw how the marble eyes gazed at infinity, and then she lost all focus.

Calliope heard the rhyme. Destiny was a rhyme, the greatest rhyme of all. It was the face that launched a thousand ships. It was the cursed gift of the Trojan horse, underneath which a secret army unleashed its full force. The Trojans rejoiced upon seeing the large horse. They drank with merriment and traded looks of delight. But as night fell, the Greeks emerged from within the horse and invaded Troy. Achilles saw his mortal flaw briefly take hold of his immortal dream. He writhed in mortal agony. The goddess wept. Her glittering tears fell like rose petals. Then she held back her tears for she did not know whether they were tears of sadness or tears of joy. Her tears were transparent, but her heart was shrouded in mystery. The goddess feared that holding back her tears might cause her heart to burst. She knew that what was concealed had to be revealed. This was Destiny's rhyme. But she felt it in her heart. *Destiny's formless lips never lie. I will sing so that a beautiful dream may never die.*

Her own memory took a fruitless leap across a void from time to time. Her voice was moving through her, searching for a way out. She could hear a rhyme forming, Destiny's rhyme. The image of the dying Achilles shone in her mind. A war had raged inside Achilles his entire life, but now it had ended. Her powerful voice slowly rose from deep within her. She could finally feel her voice rhyming with her heart.

Like every other kingdom before it, Troy fell and became a tale. Time had made the Muse its lyre, and each fallen kingdom formed its own music, a music languorous and yet endowed with its own meticulous sweetness. The Muse turned the glittering dust of time into an endless sea of molten gold.

Achilles, the most imperfect and perfect of mortals, felt that each heartbeat was a battering ram. Something inside him lay concealed by pounding flesh and caves of bone. He wished for it to find release and become tangible before his eyes. He raised his head slightly and saw a radiance piercing the darkness. He looked up to glimpse the great cosmic sea above. He hoped that even the dimmest of stars might offer respite from the onslaught of self-pity. For a brief moment, he looked up and saw the eternal sun of immortality. He felt as though someone pulled the formless globe closer to him. But then the globe vanished and he saw the small glowing figure of the goddess moving through the dark sky above him.

The goddess rode the sunless stream of cloud, swiftly descending

onto the world of mortals. Calliope watched as the mighty kingdom fell. She glided through the billowing clouds of smoke. She could hear ethereal voices fiercely contesting her actions. The other Muses spoke, their voices arising from another memory. Calliope felt two halves completing each other. Her gaze moved across the golden inferno that gilded the darkness.

The setting sun ended a day of gloryless rivalry. Calliope's flawless memory tread and retread moments from times past, but never had it heard such rhymes flow in succession. Two armies clashed as a result of a love forbidden. Paris had seduced the most beautiful woman in Greece, and as a result the union of love and war had torn sea and land asunder. The light moved through the battlefield. Both Calliope and Achilles could see it. Beauty was the beholder now, and what it saw was unspeakable horror.

Gloom encircled the totality of the city. The goddess could see something lead her through the darkness. Then she saw something akin to a bright star laying half-concealed in the ruins below, something that instantly became replaced with the sight of the dying Achilles. Calliope felt a song forming, and Achilles would allow it to be heard. She could hardly imagine a world without rhyme, and now Achilles completed a rhyme that would allow her to sing. When the goddess stood beside Achilles, the light that drew her to him and guided his gaze to her shone in its full splendor. The light of poetic inspiration stood alongside the darkness of mortality. The spark and the dark.

Achilles looks up and sees the goddess swimming into his field of vision. He knows that she is a goddess for she shines brightly before the dimming sun. The mere sight of her has halted the floodgates of fear. The world of anger inside Achilles becomes but a mild flutter of resentment.

Achilles imagines drifting between the worlds of waking and dreaming. As a child, he had dreamed the most beautiful dream. He had envisioned a world of gold spreading endlessly before him, and a path that led to the other side of that dream: immortality. Now, he winces in pain as his bloodied limbs become frozen. Achilles assumes a statuesque pose, but it is not of his own choice. He still feels the pain of his heel, which was struck by an arrow.

The goddess seemingly freezes this moment with a mere glance. The demigod becomes utterly still. Achilles feels that he has finally reached his dream, a dream of a beautifully imperfect world no longer being beautifully untrue.

A deep darkness arises, filling his vision. Then a light shines through the darkness. They stand alongside each other, the spark and the dark.

The Muse of Epic Poetry obscures Destiny's presence as she mouths words too unearthly to be heard. Calliope gazes into the gloom that encircles Achilles' dying eyes. Her eyes swim before his withering gaze one last time. Achilles wonders if she is going to sing his song or if she already sang it and he is finally hearing its glorious end. Then she hears the voice again: "Sing Muse." The goddess feels that she can finally sing.

Calliope feels the fullness of her voice at the same time that Achilles feels the last of his mortality bleed out from his wounded heel. The goddess and the demigod share a knowing look as the darkness closes in. Words form on her lips and drown out the darkness for a brief, blissful moment.

Achilles was a child again. His eyes observed light pouring down through thick branches. He wondered how the mere whisper of the wind on blades of grass seemed to untangle an enigma. A simple sunray in his eye caused the world to become refracted, as though heaven and earth laughed with merriment with him. He shielded his eyes from the golden sun, which then became a golden shield that protected him in war. Everything seemed to rhyme. Achilles heard Destiny's rhyme form on the lips of the goddess. What was concealed was now revealed. The rhyme allowed the Trojan war to become a song.

Destiny is a tale of old, which finds new meaning when retold. It wears one mask after another, for it has mastered the art of mimicry. The mask is unlike the golden mask on Agamemnon's lifeless face. Agamemnon believed that the mask would preserve his features, and that a thousand years later people would look underneath it and marvel at his immortal complexion.

Fits of maniacal laughter seized Agamemnon as the voices of the gods pushed him to the brink of madness. He wished to appease the gods by sacrificing his daughter Iphigenia. He believed that the voices would become the rhyme of Destiny. Clytemnestra drove daggers through him, and a merciless stream of blood began to flow. The king's body became an

uninhabited citadel, which reflected the ruins of the war. She loathed him for needlessly sacrificing their daughter. She felt that his act finally revealed the madness that dwelled inside him.

Agamemnon wished for the funeral mask to become blissfully seared into his flesh, and for his face to remain untouched by time while the rest of his body decomposed. But the golden visage merely concealed the mortal mask underneath, its engraved eyes sealed in golden slumber. No one would know if the voices of the gods echoed inside his skull or if he had simply gone mad. Destiny appears faintly from behind a glittering cloud of dust. A sun-drenched sky becomes a moonlit sea. Destiny speaks various rhymes before me. Beauty becomes barbarity. Lust becomes dust. Mortality becomes immortality. Near becomes far. Never becomes forever. The Trojan war now resides in the divine memory of the Muse. I, the poet, call upon her to sing:

Goddess, sing the rage of Peleus' son Achilles, murderous, doomed, that cost the Achaeans countless losses, hurling down to the House of Death so many sturdy souls, great fighters' souls, but made their bodies carrion, feasts for the dogs and birds, and the will of Zeus was moving toward its end. Begin, Muse, when the two first broke and clashed, Agamemnon lord of men and brilliant Achilles.

The voice of the Muse remains unheard. Perhaps the sound of my voice has yet to reach her. Perhaps the chasm of time that separates us is too great. But I know that a single moment can reach across aeons in an instant. *Near*

becomes far. Destiny fashions rhyme after rhyme, forming a stream that reaches for her. Perhaps it has already reached her.

Whether it is masked or unmasked, I remain uncertain. I know that no one will ever look underneath Agamemnon's golden mask, for they fear that doing so might cause Destiny's mask to come undone. Who knows what truth it might reveal?

Death smiles at Achilles, but he refuses to smile back. He can only muster the most reluctant grin. Summer and winter are bride and groom, a life of fiery passion greeting the arrival of imminent doom. An abrupt seasonal shift makes the heat of his heart feel the coolest of winds. Glory has become cold to the touch, its fire becoming ice in an instant. A celestial voice arises, nearly shattering his eardrums. But the physical pain of hearing gives way to bliss. The heavens seem to fold and reach toward him.

Immortality smiles its smiling light upon him. It has discarded the darkness of death, wiping the smile off its face. His mortal heart is ready to cross its threshold, as ready as now-entombed Troy once was.

As Achilles gazed at the goddess, he felt the mirror between what was within and what was without solidify. He finally knew the meaning of beauty and perfection. He had once spoken with Odysseus on the matter of beauty. Odysseus remembered how various men had courted young Helen. Helen had chosen Menelaus, and the rest was history.

“Men will wreak havoc to obtain beauty. What men often do not realize is

that the dream of immortality surpasses physical beauty. Of course, the soul can only see ugliness in earthly beauty's brevity when it seeks to fully immerse itself in its immortality. If the soul seeks this, it will see immortality become manifest in the external world. Only then does the beauty of the soul see itself reflected without. One's inner beauty becomes freed when one sees it become manifest before their eyes."

Achilles remembered being present when Helen was presented before her suitors. Like him, Helen was half-immortal, but her beauty caused her to be the object of lust rather than immortal longing. Odysseus had continued, "If men have ugliness in their hearts, they will only see ugliness in the world around them. Lust and greed tarnish the beauty within. Men turn beauty into ugliness, but only childhood innocence can turn ugliness into beauty. If they seek the deepest and most enduring beauty, they will see beauty in the world. And remember, my friend, beauty, real beauty, belongs in the dreaming heart of a child."

Now that the war had ended, Achilles grasped the full significance of these words. *When the heart seeks beauty, it finds its own beauty reflected before it*, he told himself. As he looked into the goddess' eyes, he felt that she was unlike any woman he had ever seen. The goddess allowed him to see the beauty in his heart, for she rhymed with his dream of immortality. Her face shone above his. There was neither lust nor revulsion in his eyes, for he finally saw the beauty in his heart reflected before him. *Beauty with beauty*. His dream of immortality reflected her act of turning the ruins of time into rhyme.

Enraged Achilles, bruised and intemperate in his demeanor, sat alone on the beach after sparring with Agamemnon. The Greeks needed him to fight the Trojans. Achilles could faintly hear their plaintive voices above the crashing waves. One of the Myrmidons approached him. In what remained of his blind, all-consuming rage, Achilles shouted obscenities and waved him away with a crude gesture.

Even the calmness of the sea reminded him of war, the tongues of liquid flame that swallowed the silences of fallen cities and men. Thetis silently emerged from the waves, her eyes smoldering orbs of sapphire that peered into the depths of his troubled soul. “You have abstained from battle. But you must fight now, my son. You must embrace your destiny, which is to die young in order for your name to live on forever.”

The war was over. The ten-year siege of Troy yielded an afterimage: the blood-rimmed bowl of the ocean being chased by a blankness too beautiful to be called oblivion. Achilles' dream will live on.

Achilles and the goddess formed a rhyme. It became a tale that raced to the end of time, but then reached back to the moment when the rhyme was born. Achilles felt this rhyme in the moment when immortality shone before him. He could see his dream of immortality reflected in the otherworldly orbs that were Calliope's eyes. The rhyme moved through time, and the epic poem was about to begin.

The goddess of memory could hear Achilles now. Achilles saw his dream become tangible before him:

Sing no more, Muse, for the lights of Olympus have faded. The gods have fallen silent, the glowing worlds beneath them no longer in a state of becoming. Helen's beauty, the bearer of all summer likenesses, becomes a mere imprint on my tongue's last spoken syllable. A once-unending river bends. I feel time irrevocably shifting my life's golden stream. My life is ending. Time hurls itself toward me, distinctly sharp and clear in its mortal profusion. The arrow reaches its mark. My half-perspiring palms are intersecting lines, which then converge with smaller lines along the coarsely gleaming moisture. I sink beneath the weight of a heavy sky.

A world immeasurably white now breathes the end of me, reminding me of the silent kindness of snow. My time has come. My life ebbs away into a rimless ocean, the sun above it no longer a radiant disc but a sky entire. A heaven-shaped sun filled to my mortal world's brim. The light of this sky blinds me with necessity, for it quickly departs and gives way to heavy tears of soot. The sky is now as sightless as a poetry unheard, the dim stars in it teeming with unconcern, half-jovial indifference even. My life rises beneath the blackened dome. It moves like a century's incessant yearning. I find myself wrestling with history's iron grasp, and then I see the beauty of a woman whose life's moments come together to form her matchless visage. My life ebbs out in slow rivers, but my remembering mind takes me back to the most beautiful and ageless beginnings. My senses begin to dim, and I feel unconsciousness slowly rising. But my heart still beats with the deepest of yearnings,

for it allows me to feel that I am part of that glorious world. The Muse now looks deeply into my eyes. I feel my life unfolding for a second time.

My name arises from her memory divine, sweetly lingering on her honeyed lips. The inspiration she infused into my heart shines through my scar-filled flesh. She has committed my entire life to memory, for she knows the tale of time itself. She knows where time begins and where it ends. The goddess has rendered rhymes unspoken spoken between my humble birth and the glories that followed.