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Friday

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Friday

FRIDAY¹

by Shane Clack

“Far in the deep dank belly of Earth ‘neath the white-crested sea-waves,
Deep as the calm, airy sky blue and pervasive leaps high,
I to my comrades so slowly turning heaving a vast sigh
Comfortless words all woe spoke with a quavering voice:
‘Men of my heart, I would not have my memory tainted by fearful
Faithless behavior. I, steadfast with you hitherto...
Bold I know has my heart been before and bold my commands when
Fate seemed to loom so close—bravely a-flashing my sword!
Yet now when the hands creep closer and closer, now when more certain,
Staring into my soul—the spectre of Death all gaunt!
Quaking and trembling into my limbs enter now like an ether.
Fear shakes the sacker of Troy, with’ring his hair like a man
Four score winters old and beset with infirm’ty and sorrow...
Chance of my dying on Earth, falling in war with my men—
Life-giving Sun looking on with a hope still withheld for us mortals,
Promise and hope yet obscure—heart’ning and helpful no less!—
Such chance, such apprehension of death on the field and of war-wounds
Never, no, never would stop, nor keep back my fame-seeking hand.
Here I stand though wholly defeated and dreading a certain,
Waiting and watching doom—I, who above all want rest,
Dreamless slumber warm and enclosing me next to the own dear
Wife of my youth, find instead—‘Stead of divine, succ’ring Sleep—
I meet his cold, witless brother...and he never yields up his own guests,
Renders them back to the Day. Never! But deep in this place,
Deep in the woe-weary grave he will stow his own til the Sun fails,
The Moon dip her garments in Styx—blood-red and death-wreaking Styx!
Banish from hearts all hope in the presence of Man’s final ruler!
Hades is calling and here, lowly, I bid you farewell!
Tho’ told by the Sibyl of unlying lips—by the unerring Phoebus—
Told that my steps I’d retrace, still I believe this my end!’”
Ending his speech then the god-like king turned away to the gloaming

¹ Author’s note:

“Friday” is my retelling of Odysseus’ descent to Hades, recounted in Book 11 of the *Odyssey*. Anyone well-acquainted with the epic poem will recall that Odysseus journeys to Hades (imagined in Homer as a land on the edge the world, rather than below it) only to hear the prophecy of Tiresias. He succeeds in this mission and then lingers to speak to the shades of famous men and women who have gone on before. Hades does not, in fact, seem to hold a lot of fear for the mortal hero not yet fated to die. In my re-imagining, however, I call into question that self-assuredness of Odysseus. How many men—even heroes—would enter the abode of Death so unaffectedly, whatever the promises that they would return again?

The poem’s title makes reference to a circumstance of its composition, rather than to something inside the poem itself. It was written at a very early hour on the morning of Good Friday. Seen in this light, you might say that Odysseus’ speech here constitutes a Gethsemane of sorts. It represents, at the least, my typological understanding of Book 11.