

My brother Tydeus walks some unknown coastline in exile.

The other brother? Placed in the death-fire alive.

My mother drove the iron right through her own middle.

Impious Deianira! Why waver at death's door?

I make this one prayer, by our bed's laws most sacred:

Let me not seem to have plotted your fate.

When Nessus's lusting breast was pierced through by your arrow,

he said: "This blood holds the power of love."

Yes, I sent you my weavings smeared with the venom of Nessus!

Impious Deianira! Why waver at death's door?

And now, goodbye, my old father and Gorge, my sister,

and country, and brother from country deprived,

and you, the freshest and last light in my eyes, today's light, and my husband—

but oh!—if you could!—and my boy Hyllus, goodbye.

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HEROIDES X: ARIADNE TO THESEUS

Theseus has left Ariadne on an island after she helped him defeat the Minotaur. Upon waking and discovering his absence, Ariadne writes to her lover.

I've seen all species of beast be sweeter than you are!

I've found the single worst place for my trust.

What you read now, I send from that very same shore

where swollen sails carried you off without me.

That shore where my own sleep turned traitor as you did,

plotting against me while I lay in dreams.

It was that hour of morning when glassy frost smears the land,

and birds start to quibble, cached away in the leaves.

At the lip of consciousness but slow with sleep, I stir,

half on my back, and reach my hands for Theseus . . .

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There is no one. My hands flinch back. I reach again,

sweeping my arms wide over the bed—no one.

Terror bludgeons out the sleep. I sit up panicking

and fall headlong from the widowed bed.

Clenched fists smack against my chest, fingers wind through hair

and tear at the unruly, matted bedhead.

The moon was there. I squint to see anything but beach,

but everywhere I turn my eye: nothing but beach.

Here, now there, now here again, I run in disarray

as the deep sands sink and slow a girl's feet,

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all the while shouting "Theseus!" down the beach.

The hollow rocks roll back your name,

and as many times as I call you, so does this place,

lending its voice to a pitiable girl.

The mountains were there, the shrubs in scant tufts at the top,

an out-jutting rock nibbled away by the waves.

I climb, I climb, my mind gives me strength, and at the peak

I look out in panorama, scan the deep.

And from my new vantage and suffering winds, also cruel,
I glimpse your sails, pitched full by the quick south wind.
When I see this sight, unwarranted, undeserved by me,
I grow colder than ice, only half alive.

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But my pain will not abide by such a swooning daze.
Pain rouses me. I call to Theseus powerfully.
"Where are you running?" I shout. "You brute, turn around!
Count your people, one is missing from your ship!"
What my voice lacks, I fill with the beating of my chest,
and the beating blends with my words.
I think, "Even if you can't hear me, still you might see me,"
and I send wild signals with windmilling arms.
I drape my glimmering veil on the tip of a long stick
to jog the memory of those who forgot me.
By then, you are beyond eye's reach. And at last, I weep.
My tender eyes had been numbed to face this pain,
but once they could no longer see your canvas sails,
what more could my eyes do for me but weep?

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Since then, I have either wandered alone, my hair wind-blown,
like a bacchant summoned by the Ogygian god,
or I have sat frozen on a rock, staring out toward the sea,
blending in with other stones, a stone myself.
I return often to the bed that received both of us
but would never make good its receipts,
and in your absence, I touch what trace of you I can:
your footprints and the bedding once warmed by your skin.
I lie in it, and as my tears spread out across the bed,
I shout, "Two pressed down upon you. Now, restore the two!
We came here together, why do we not leave together?
Traitorous little bed, where is my better half?"

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What should I do? Where can I go alone? This island is barren.
I see no handiwork of man or ox.
Ocean circles all this land, and yet I see no sailors,
nor any ship to cross uncertain paths.

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But suppose I were given companions, fair winds, and a vessel:
What is my plan? My fatherland disowns me.
Even if I cross a placid sea in a lucky ship,
even if Aeolus tames the winds, I'm an exile.
I'll never see you again, Crete, spread across one hundred cities,
the land familiar to Jove since he was a boy,
since my just father and the land he rules—names dear to me—
have been betrayed by own wicked deed.

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When, fearing you should die in those halls that loop back and back,
I gave you the string as your guide, sovereign to your steps,
in that moment you said to me: "I swear by these perils
that if we both live, you will be mine."
Both of us live, and yet I am not yours, Theseus
(if a girl can live entombed in a man's deceit).
Wicked man, you should have clubbed me to death as you did
my brother.
Then my death would have absolved you of your oath.

Now, I not only ponder the fate which I will suffer,
and the fate any abandoned girl might face—
into my mind rush a thousand forms of perishing,
and awaiting death is worse than death itself.
Now, now I expect to see them coming, from here, from there,
to tear at my belly with glutting fang, the wolves.
Who knows if such a land may nurture tawny lions?
Perhaps this isle holds savage tigers, too.
They say that the sea spits out great, hulking seals!
And what will stop swords from piercing my side?
If only I'm not bound in hard chains as a captive,
or forced to spin wool with slave's hands. Me!
Whose father is Minos, whose mother is Phoebe's daughter,
and who, what matters more, was engaged to you!
When I look upon sea or land or shore, all expanse,
the lands threaten me terribly, the waters too.
Heaven remained, but how the gods' figures affright me!
I am deserted, a feast for the feral.

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Even if men do inhabit this land, I don't trust them:
 My wounds have taught me to be afraid of strange men.
 If only Androgeos had lived! Then you, land of Cecrops,
 would not have paid for that crime with your deaths. 100
 Your right hand raised high, Theseus, would not have slaughtered
 the part-man, part-bull with a knotted stake;
 I would never have given the string to point your way back,
 the string traced back again and again in your hands.
 I'm not at all amazed that Victory stands by you,
 and that the monster struck Cretan soil, splayed out.
 A steel heart could not be pierced by horn. Your breast was unharmed,
 although you did nothing to shield it;
 There you carry stone, there you carry adamant,
 and there, a man to conquer stone: Theseus. 110

Cruel sleep, why did you cling to me, fetter me idle?
 I'd rather be smothered by one night eternal.
 And you, cruel winds, who had been prepared all too well,
 and your gusts all too eager for my tears.
 Cruel the right hand that put me and my brother to death,
 and that promise (hollow word) you gave when I asked.
 Sleep and wind and promises all swore a pact against me,
 and I, a single girl, was betrayed on three fronts.
 Will I not, then, see my mother's tears before I die,
 and will there be no one to lower my eyes? 120
 Will my wretched soul slip away onto foreign breezes,
 and will no friendly hand anoint my limbs, placed just so?
 Will my unburied bones become perches for seabirds?
 Is this the tomb that my kindness deserves?

You will go and be welcomed in the harbors of Cecrops,
 and there stand tall before the crowds.
 You will tell your story well: the death of a bull and a man,
 a stone palace cut into wandering paths.
 But then tell of me, in a lonely land abandoned.
 Don't let me be struck from your accolades. 130

You are no son of Aegeus, nor of Pittheus's Aethra.
 No, your creators are the rock and the sea!
 If only the gods made you see me from atop your high stern!
 You would have been moved by the pitiful sight.

But behold me now, not with your eyes but with your mind,
 clinging to this rock, battered by meandering waves.
 Behold my hair, let loose like that of one in mourning,
 and my clothes, heavy with tears as though with rain.
 My body bristles like a wheatfield struck by a north wind,
 my letter slips under my trembling hand. 140
 I don't beg you for what I merit, since that's all spoiled now.
 Let no thanks be owed for my actions, but surely
 no punishment either. Even if I weren't your savior,
 there's no reason for you to bring about my death.
 I, unhappy, reach for you across long seas with these hands
 exhausted from beating my aching breast.
 I, wretched, exhibit for you my hair, what hair is left me.
 I pray by my tears, brought about by your deeds,
 turn your ship, Theseus, reverse your sails, turn around!
 If I die before then, you can salvage my bones. 150