

THE SONGS OF THE KINGS

By Barry Unsworth

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Barry Unsworth was born in 1930 in a mining village in Durham, and he attended Stockton-on-Tees Grammar School and Manchester University. He has spent a number of years in the eastern Mediterranean area and has taught English in Athens and Istanbul. He now lives in Italy. His first novel, *The Partnership*, was published in 1966. This was followed by *The Greeks Have a Word for It* (1967); *The Hide* (1970); *Mooncranker's Gift*, which received the Heinemann Award for 1973; *Pascali's Island*, which was shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 1980 and has been filmed; *Stone Virgin* (1985); *Sugar and Rum* (1990); *The Rage of the Vulture* (1991); *Sacred Hunger*, which was joint winner of the 1992 Booker Prize; *Morality Play*, which was shortlisted for the 1995 Booker Prize; *After Hannibal* (1996); *Losing Nelson* (1999); and *The Songs of the Kings* (2002). Many of his books are published by Penguin. Barry Unsworth received an Honorary Doctorate of Letters from the University of Manchester in 1998, and recently taught at the Iowa Writers' Workshop. He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature.

For Aira with love and thanks

The Eagles of Zeus

1. This was the sixth night. He had lain awake through most of it, listening to the wind, the body of the sleeping boy beside him, beset by fear at still not knowing the sender, fear of other failures that might follow from this. The strands of the wind he knew by this time; tensed in concentration, he imagined he could hold them apart, the shrilling high up among the bare rocks, the softer combing in the shrub lower down, the ripple of loose canvas from the tents. Even the very smallest sounds he strained to hear, random sobs and whispers, stirring of grasses, the faint scrape of displaced pebbles along the shore. A wind from the north-east, unheard of at this season, keeping the fleet trapped in these straits at Aulis, and the army with it, waking the men every morning to the unhappy knowledge of some god's displeasure. It came from the direction of Troy, where lay their dreams of conquest. [...]

[Same paragraph] Six days and six nights with no sign of relenting, though the voices varied. The wind itself seemed to suffer in all its moods, even in its rages pleading to be quieted, to be soothed.

Then, early in the morning of the seventh day, came the summons from Agamemnon. He noted the time just as in those days of his power he noted all such things. Just before sunrise, the wind still there but quieter now, as if for the while exhausted after its riots in the dark. A time disputed between Hecate and Helios, when the world is between states. He was between states himself, as he also noted: neither inside the tent nor out of it, but cross-legged on a cushion at the threshold, watching his acolyte Poimenos, who was still half-asleep, fumbling together a fire for the infusion of mint and honey he had been schooled to prepare. And he was neither clothed nor naked, being dressed only in a loincloth, with a piece of cotton over his shoulder as a shawl. These were things important to remember and interpret; not mortals but gods chose the times.

It was the chief scribe Chasimenos who brought the message, approaching from the rear, appearing suddenly, flanked by soldiers from the King's Guard. At midday, after the fight, Agamemnon would require the presence in his tent of Kalunas, I beg your pardon, *Calchas*, priest of Apollo.

He smiled saying this, glancing away with eyes so pale as to seem almost colourless in the narrow, bearded face. Calchas read the usual veiled contempt in voice and smile, the elaborate politeness, the stress upon the name, not his own, bestowed on him by the Greeks. Contempt too for his shaven face, his plaited hair, the smudges of kohl that would be still on his eyelids, the amulets worn as a bracelet, contrary to Greek custom. Asian priest of an Asian god without even a cult center yet established here.

[New paragraph] All this was in the looks and the words – Calchas was practised in reading such marks. But there was also the fact that this upstart diviner had been granted a shelter of canvas when most of the army spent the nights in the open, finding what cover they could; that he had a boy to share his tent and see to his needs; that he slept on a woollen mat, thickly woven; that he need not reply promptly to a messenger, even one of high rank. It was common knowledge that the King would make no decision, take no step, before Calchas had first scanned the auguries.

Chasimenos stood there waiting, in his long-sleeved tunic of a palace bureaucrat. His smile had withered at the delay. 'The King requires the presence of his seer,' he repeated. The soldiers stood on either side of him, their long spears grounded, their faces heavy with ill-humour at being given escort duties at such an hour, not much after dawn. It was early for the King to send; he would have had another bad night. Chasimenos had no need of an escort for such a small thing as this. But the habit of armed guards had grown in the days they had been here, waiting on the wind. Agamemnon himself never appeared without at least six. He said, 'Calchas will be honoured beyond honour to kneel at the King's feet. May he live for ever.'

As he spoke he heard the small crackle of the fire, saw the smoke rise straight up in a thin plume. He felt a slight shudder within him, premonition of ill. These calms were dangerous, always brief, cheating the army with hope. There was some quality of danger too in this dawn summons to a meeting he had not been consulted about. Nothing of this showed on his face. He had known how to wait before answering, just as he knew now how to appear unaffected.

He had expected, the answer once given, that the other would quit his presence immediately – it was one he had never

[Same paragraph] shown signs of liking, not even back in Mycenae, before they had set out. But Chasimenos remained there, and after a moment, in a tone he tried to make friendlier, said, 'Which of them do you think will win?'

Now at last Calchas could permit himself to show some slight surprise. He was being solicited for an opinion as to who would live and who would die that morning: Stimon the Locrian or Opilmenos the Boeotian, due to fight a duel later on as champions of their respective tribes. 'I have no ideas on the matter,' he said, which was untrue.

'Opilmenos is the stronger and has more battle experience, but they say this Locrian is very quick.'

Something in the tone of this suggested that the scribe might have a stake in the outcome. Calchas had heard from Poimenos, who came and went about the camp on various kinds of foraging expeditions, gathering gossip on the way, that the men were wagering on the result. Though what they could have to wager it was hard to see – they possessed nothing but their weapons.

Chasimenos was lingering still. 'I thought that the god might have made it known to you,' he said.

Calchas shook his head. 'What does Lord Apollo care for the quarrels of men? Live or die, what concern is it of his? The gods will view the proceedings with complete and serene indifference unless there is some offence we know nothing of, something done or left undone, said or left unsaid, which might weigh against the one or the other man when it comes to the meeting. It is dangerous to neglect a god, even when not knowing. Punishment can arrive before knowledge.'

He spoke carefully, knowing the other for an enemy who would destroy him if he had the power. He *had* been given

[Same paragraph] a sign as to who would be the victor, but it would have been unwise to talk to Chasimenos about this, as it had been of an unusual kind and he had mentioned it to no one. The

outcome of the fight was of course the only thing Chasimenos couldn't organize. He was a gifted and devoted administrator, meticulous to the point of obsession, which was why he held his senior position in the palace hierarchy. He had been busy with this fight from the moment Agamemnon had given his approval for it, working out in close detail the order of assembly, the precise positions to be occupied by the allied forces when they lined up for the spectacle. A real headache that, Calchas thought, to remember all the quarrels, some of them ancient, keep feuding tribes at a safe distance from one another. But the outcome couldn't be fixed. No one is bribed to lose in a fight to the death... 'This wind that plagues us is an example,' he said. 'The punishment has come before the knowledge of the fault.'

As if in support of him, the wind rose again now in a long gust that scattered the smoke and rattled the canvas of the tents throughout the camp like a fury of drums. One of the guards clutched at his helmet.

Disappointed at not getting the hot tip he had obviously been hoping for, Chasimenos reverted to his former aloof and slightly sneering manner. 'Croton wouldn't agree with you. He maintains that Zeus cares what happens to every single one of us.'

'Yes, I know Croton says that, he says we are the children of Zeus.' Calchas paused, again conscious of the need for caution. Zeus was the father-god of the Greeks and Croton was the priest of Zeus, with a large following in the army. He and his two disciples paraded frequently through the camp, proclaiming the power of their god. 'Zeus is lord of all,' he said. 'But how can we be children of the gods when we are made of

[Same paragraph] different stuff, when we are perishable and they are not? It isn't logical. We have one season only but the gods live for ever. Of course, there is shelter in the thought of a father, and shelter is needed.'

He was beginning to enlarge on this theme, which he had suddenly found interesting, the relation between the need and the thing needed, which thing existed at first only because of that need, but then, because of that need, took on true existence. 'Perhaps it works the other way, too,' he said. 'Perhaps we humans only exist because the gods need us.'

But Chasimenos said nothing to this and did not stay to listen to more, turning abruptly on his heel and disappearing round the side of the tent. However, there was comedy in this that made up for the rudeness; the guards were taken quite by surprise and had to go lumbering after him, hoisting their spears awkwardly. Measured movement, a certain stateliness, were necessary for a person under escort; but Chasimenos, used to scuttling down palace corridors with no company but his own intriguing mind, had yet to learn this. A mistake in any case to talk much at all to him. Themes commonly discussed in Apasas, city of his birth, and the lands of the Hatti from Kadesh to Sardis, were too abstract for these gross Mycenaean minds. Even a scribe, he thought, a representative of their intellectual class. Chasimenos was hostile enough, without having claims made on his intelligence that his intelligence was not able to meet.

He stayed where he was while the light strengthened. After a while Poimenos brought his drink and a wheat cake to go with it. They were in wheat country here, with fertile land to the south; and now, at the end of August, the harvest was in, though the troops had to go farther afield every day in search

[Same paragraph] of full granaries – it was known now that the local people were hiding their grain. Unpatriotic scum, in the words of Menelaus. Since losing his beautiful Helen to Paris – that swine of an Asian, as he called him – Menelaus spoke often of patriotism and solidarity.

As Calchas ate and drank, the first darts of the sun struck through the canvas of the tent behind him, warming the odours of night still caught there in that narrow space – oxhide, crushed grass, the faint scent of bodies in the folds of the wool. Before his face was the radiant sky, a few bright curls of cloud low on the horizon, moving slowly, barely perceptibly – this wind did not change the sky, did not bring storms. He watched the clouds drift together, looked for a shape in them. A fleece, a swan's neck, the forepart of a chariot. He strove to empty his mind for the message, but he could read nothing there, they were random shapes; and he felt a constriction of the heart at this further failure, knowing that nothing in the world was random. There had been no sign for him in clouds or embers or the flight of birds, not one, in all these days at Aulis, when signs were so desperately needed, when Agamemnon waited for his words, when all the camp waited to know who was sending this wind that kept them huddled here along the shore, a thousand men, the greatest army ever assembled by the Greeks in alliance, trapped here while the useless ships rocked at anchor and the waves mocked them and slapped their hulls. In these sheltered waters, with the hills of Euboea making a barrier, the wind had a varying breath, sometimes deep-voiced, sometimes screaming, sometimes, as now, derisively gentle, hardly more than a breeze; but once, round the promontories, when you were facing the open sea, the wind was a flail of terrible power, beating ships back, smashing them on the rocks.

[New paragraph] He could see the masts from the rise where he was sitting. That August sky was so fiercely bright, they glowed as they swayed as if stirred in their own fire. Smoke was rising everywhere now, swirled by the wind, shot through with sunshine. There were voices and movements of men lower down towards the shore, where the main body of the army was encamped.

With the warmth, the pervasive smell of human excrement grew stronger. On the third day, Ajax of Salamis, called Ajax the Larger, who thought of himself as a practical fellow, had organized his people to dig a long trench for a latrine – a heavy job in the hard ground of the hillside. The whole force from Salamis had been employed on this, labouring in shifts. It kept them busy, an added advantage, as Ajax remarked to his small friend and namesake, Ajax the Locrian, called Ajax the Lesser. Mischief was bred by idleness; working together for a common purpose was good for morale. You form them into squads, appoint a few overseers, tell them you'll tan their hides if there is any slacking, and there you are. Unfortunately, however, in his enthusiasm for the project, Ajax had temporarily forgotten why they had all been obliged to wait there in the first place, and sited the latrine to windward of the camp. Being obstinate in the extreme, he would not admit his mistake, and now forced all the contingent from Salamis to continue using the latrine on pain of his severe displeasure – and all knew what that meant – if found defecating anywhere else. It was generally agreed that the people of Salamis had not been the luckiest contingent so far. Meanwhile the smell was getting worse. People grumbled, but in the general apathy that had fallen over the camp no one was ready yet to face the violent encounter with the enormous Ajax that any direct protest was certain to bring about.

[New paragraph] Thinking of this brought back to his mind thoughts of the fight that was soon to take place. He believed he knew who would win it. He had been given a sign, not because the gods were interested in the outcome, but because their power pervaded human life, like this fire that glowed on the masts without consuming them.

On the first night of their stay here, when it was still thought the wind would be short-lived and spirits were high, he had walked alone along the shore, passing close to where the Locrians had their quarters. He had seen one of them dancing with wonderful grace in the firelight, to the music of pipe and drum. The man was naked but for a loincloth and his body shone with oil or sweat. The fire was veering and flaring in the wind and he brought these movements of the flames into the dance, stepping near to the fire with his arms raised and his head turning, now held in stern profile, now glancing down in serious pride. Such a dancer was he that Calchas had stayed to watch and seen him twice leap the fire, over and back, without faltering, without breaking the rhythm of the dance, so that those watching him shouted in exhilaration, their hearts leaping with him as he leapt. The firelight was cast upward and Calchas had seen the man's face clearly and the faces of those nearest. He had seen the Singer there too, a little apart, with his lyre laid across his knees, looking straight before him, and he had wondered what this scene might mean to the Singer, who was almost blind, what flickering, looming shapes of dancer and flame he might be seeing.

So he had watched for a while, then moved on; but the strong impression of the dancing stayed with him. Then there had been the brawl between groups of Locrians and Boeotians, and a serious wounding – a man stabbed in the right shoulder, disabled. Such incidents bred feuds, when men had little else in

[Same paragraph] mind; and feuds among the Greek tribes, once taking hold, spread like a virulent fever. So champions had been elected in haste on either side to meet in single combat and settle the matter.

It was when he saw these champions brought forward to be presented to the assembled host that Calchas thought he knew which would be victorious. He had recognized the Locrian at once: it was the man who had danced in the firelight. The other was a half-head taller, smooth-haired, narrow at the waist and powerful in the shoulders, an athlete. Moreover, he was a professional soldier who had fought for Thebes against the combined forces of Phocis and Megaris. They stood on either side of Odysseus, who along with Chasimenos had organized the business, while their names were shouted out: Stimon of Locris, Opilmenos of Boeotia. Both were acclaimed in equal measure for the promise of entertainment they offered, and the Boeotian smiled to hear the shouts but the Locrian remained as serious now as he had been among his own people.

As Calchas had watched and seen one man smile and the other not, it had come to him with luminous certainty that Stimon the dancer would be the one to die. He remembered how he had been drawn by the music and the shouting. And he knew now that he had been directed to turn his steps that way, so as to come upon the man in the pride of life, at the climax of his dancing, when he leapt the fire. The truth of things lay always in contradiction; as the cup brimmed, so it spilled. His own splendour had marked the dancer out for death. So Calchas had reasoned when the champions were brought forward; and so he reasoned still as the sun climbed in the sky and they waited for the event.

Poimenos was sitting on the other side of the dying fire,

[Same paragraph] keeping his distance in the absence of indications to do otherwise. Calchas noted that the boy had copied his own posture with exact fidelity, sitting cross-legged with back held straight, holding his bowl of tea with both hands. He would have dipped his cake into the warm tea and eaten it so; Calchas knew this, though he had been too much occupied with his thoughts to notice. He knew it because it was what he did himself. Poimenos watched him without seeming to and strove to imitate his movements in the hope of being graced to read the signs, and so take some part in the stories of the gods and in their power. Perhaps then he would leave me, Calchas thought. But there was no danger; the boy was devoted but he showed no sign of a gift. There were those who were drawn to the threshold never to enter the house; he was one of that number, born to serve. At times, Calchas detected the helpless knowledge of this already in him. He was beautiful to look at, slender of form and narrow-boned, with eyes black as jet, slanting upward towards the temples, and a mouth with a full underlip, giving him a slightly sulky expression as if needing kisses. Poimenos had been a gift from the gods to him; he had found the boy at Delphi when he had gone there from Mycenae, sent by Agamemnon to consult the Oracle of Ge, the Great Mother, as to the outcome of the war, which at that time was still at the planning stage. The boy had been a server there at the sanctuary, the humblest of servers, sweeping the precincts, gathering wood for the sacred fire, which was tended by others. He had run away from home, a mountain village on the slopes of Parnassus, and was living as he could on the leftovers from the offerings. Poimenos had been at his side when he had half-fainted and almost fallen at the vision granted him by the oracle,

[Same paragraph] the river of blood and the warriors of Troy rolling over and over in the swift current, borne away on their own blood-tide. The boy had seen his power then and stayed by his side ever since. The vision he had recounted to Agamemnon, and received gold beads and a silk vest...

More to get the boy to look openly at him than for any other reason, Calchas said, 'They are wagering on the result of this fight, isn't it so?'

'They are laying bets, yes.'

'But what kind of betting can that be? The mass of them have nothing but what they stand up in, apart from their weapons, and those they can't risk losing, surely.'

Poimenos hesitated a little before replying. He was easily abashed when it came to speaking and had difficulty in finding words. 'The bets are what you say you will give, they are like promises.'

'But that is always so with bets.'

'No, Master, the promises are for when we take Troy.'

'Ah yes, I see. Then we will all be rich.' From the fabled spoils of the city the debt would be paid. A girl, a gold seal, a bronze tripod, a certain weight of amber or silver. It was a form of dreaming. In that great tide of plunder there could be no losers. He thought of the other tide, the one he had seen as the scented smoke rose to his nostrils and the voice came from below the ground in broken words and snatches of song. A flood of red between the banks and the armed bodies rolling in it like the tumbling of debris in the swollen waters of the Maeander River in early spring, which he remembered from childhood. 'The dead won't have to pay,' he said. 'But of course those making promises expect to kill, not to die, don't they?'

Poimenos might have found some answer to this, but

[Same paragraph] Calchas did not give him time. Prey to sudden curiosity, he said, 'Who will be the winner today, in your opinion?'

This time there was no hesitation. 'Opilmenos, Master. Opilmenos will win.'

Calchas looked at his acolyte for some time in smiling silence. The boy was particularly beautiful to him at this moment, touching too, his face radiant with the force of his opinion; not so much an opinion, the priest thought, as a view of the world. Poimenos had chosen the one who was better made, more handsome, more like the kind of hero he would have wished to be himself. These were the qualities that carried success; how could one live in a world in which things were otherwise? One day the boy would wake up in that world and never leave it again... With an intensity that brought the beginnings of tears to his eyes Calchas found himself hoping that this would not happen for a long time. In the candour and simplicity of the boy he had found solace and repose, a refuge from the tortuous purposes of the gods and his own tormented subtleties; and he never prayed to Pollein, whom the Greeks called Apollo, without remembering to give thanks for the gift.

Poimenos, emboldened by the kindness in the priest's regard, now gave way to curiosity in his turn. 'Master, which do *you* think will win?'

But Calchas shook his head, still smiling. A diviner of status did not indulge in unofficial forecasts, even to those he held dear. The question was the one Chasimenos had asked; and he gave now the same reply: 'I have no ideas on the matter.'

[New paragraph and chapter] 2. The fire was out and he was already thinking of getting dressed when the army started to assemble. There was no need for him to make any immediate move. This was a military assembly, a marshalling of combatants. There was no place for him in these ranks, any more than for the priest of Zeus, or scribes like Chasimenos, or the bronze-smith and his slave assistants. He watched for a while, from this higher ground, as they formed up in rank upon rank on the shore under the direction of their officers and in accordance with the plans drawn up by Chasimenos, a naked host – in this hot weather they wore only loincloths and the improvised leggings essential for anyone moving about in the thorny scrub above the shore. The nakedness gave an impression of unity entirely misleading, Calchas thought, seeing how carefully the men were kept within their tribes, Molossians from the mountains of

[Same paragraph] Epirus, Aetolians from the northern shores of the Corinthian Gulf, the seventy from Arcadia under their chief Inachus, speaking a language that did not sound like Greek at all. Then the combined force from the cities of the Argolis, headed by Mycenae, 400 men, the core of the army, then Achaians and Messenians, then the Hellenes from Crete, under their king Idomeneus.

On they came, mostly in bands of not more than a few dozen, men of every physical type. They were silent and their footsteps were noiseless in the soft sand of the upper shore above the line of the dunes. There was only the loud sound made by the wind as it moved over the water, something between a hiss and a whistle, as if escaping from some vast puncture or breach in the sky. It was lower down, on the shingled ground, that the two men would fight, and a space was left there between the ranks.

They were still coming when he went back inside the tent to prepare himself for the meeting that was immediately to follow the fight.

Agamemnon had not appeared yet, nor would he until all other movement was over, and only he was moving. Calchas felt a return of that earlier foreboding. Something would be expected from him. It was important that he should take care of his appearance.

It was hotter now inside the tent, with the sun striking through the canvas. Poimenos mixed oil with a little lemon juice in the shallow cup he always used and soothed it into his master's skin where the skin was dry, as he had been taught to do, at the nape and over the shoulders and back and over the outer parts of the thighs. Under the pressure of the boy's fingers Calchas felt his body loosen and relax, the fear and worry recede. Poimenos combed out the long dark hair, still tangled

[Same paragraph] from sleep, applied scented oil to the temples and scalp, dressed the fringe of hair back from the forehead with thin-toothed bronze combs. The loincloth was abandoned and Calchas struggled into the long, close-fitting skirt, with its pattern of sacred circles. He kept his eyes patiently closed so that Poimenos could blacken the lids and outer corners with kohl, and his face held still for the white make-up, the application of which required much concentration, as the circles had to be perfect in shape and the chalk paste made lustrous by the careful addition of sheep grease, which Poimenos kept in a small terracotta pot.

When all this was done and he had donned his amulets and necklace of amber constellation signs, he emerged again to find that the chiefs had now joined their contingents. Achilles, wearing a bored look as usual, stood with his Phthians; the ancient Nestor, flanked by his two sons, was at the head of the force from Pylos; Odysseus of Ithaca was there with his stocky, fair-bearded compatriots from the Western Islands. The chiefs were clothed above the waist as well in order to mark the distinction – they wore the usual sleeveless tunic and short kilt.

There was some talking now among the waiting men. They stood there in their ranks between the sea and the hills in the hot, gritty wind – there was no chill in the wind, though it came from the north-east, another mystery that had exercised Calchas. He saw that the Boeotians and Locrians, whose representatives were to fight, had been placed as far apart as possible. A wise move. But it was more complicated than that. Even within the ranks of the Boeotians care had been taken to separate the people of Orchomenus from those of Thebes, ancient foes with a long history of mutual pillage and murder. The Ainians and Atticans, who were in feud because of a rape not yet reciprocated

[Same paragraph] and who shouted insults and threats at the sight of each other, had also been sited at the greatest possible distance apart. If the gods were to glance down at this formation, it would serve them as a chart or plan of all the bloody discords that riddled the host assembled here, the Expeditionary Force, as Agamemnon liked to call it. The delay caused by the wind was envenoming these divisions day by day, loosening what loyalties there were, setting the King's authority more and more in doubt. It was why he had given his consent to this general assembly, this fight to the death. A spectacle would hold the men together, make them forget – at least for a while – their various discontents.

It would take more than this, Calchas privately thought, to keep such a rabble quiet for long. What did these people care about the pretext given out for the war, the honour of the house of Atreus, Helen's flight with the Trojan Paris – a boaster who put it about that he had seen Aphrodite naked, looked at her from every side, and that the sight had enhanced his libido to such a phenomenal degree that he now secreted semen as fast as he spent it? Who could take a man like that seriously? Even if it were true – a man might be favoured, though undeserving – who but Menelaus would care about Helen's multiple pleasures and repeated cries of joy? Troy meant one thing only to the men gathered here, as it did to their commanders. Troy was a dream of wealth; and if the wind continued the dream would crumble, Agamemnon's authority would slip away and with it his command, that too like a dream gone wrong. Then it would be dangerous for those too close to him, people like Chasimenos. People like himself...

Now, as he watched, two guards brought out from the King's tent his great throne-chair, straining with the weight of

[Same paragraph] it, while a third followed behind with his footstool. These were set down in the space that had been allotted to them, at the exact midpoint between the two masses of waiting men, separated as these were by the combat area itself, a rough square of pebbled ground; twelve paces by twelve, sloping slightly down towards the sea. Thus chair and stool occupied the dead centre of this universe of the duel, a calculated effect and a triumph of planning on the part of Chasimenos.

A certain silence descended as all gazed at these emblems of the wealth and power of Mycenae, the high-backed chair of African ebony, incised all over in an elaborate pattern of gold wires, with panels of alabaster at the sides; the footstool inlaid with figures of men and lions in ivory and silver and amethyst. Agamemnon had had them brought by ox-train over the rough roads from Mycenae to the sea at Lerna and embarked them at the very place where for his second labour Heracles slew the fearsome Hydra in the time of long ago. The King understood the importance of symbols. It had been the one mission the hero had not been able to accomplish alone. He had been obliged to call on the help of his charioteer Iolaus, who had come with burning-brands and as Heracles chopped off the monster's ravaging heads had cauterized the wounds so the heads could not grow again. The vanquished Hydra was Troy; Iolaus represented the forces allied with Mycenae. All very well, so far as it went. But Calchas had not been happy with the choice of embarkation point. For one thing, there was the excessive pride, inviting rebuke or worse, of putting oneself on the same level as a demi-god; and then there was the fact that the hero had taken the Hydra's venom to poison his arrows, and it was this same venom, after many enemies slain, that had

[Same paragraph] later devoured his own flesh. This placed a dark question over the future, adding to the fears and anxieties Calchas was always prone to and which he nowadays felt were increasing. When it came to symbols it was all or nothing, you could not pick and choose. But he had been afraid to say this to Agamemnon, whose displeasure could take violent forms. Troy meant wealth to Agamemnon too, and it was easy to see why he was always so in need of it. Chair and stool together, made to order by Cretan craftsmen, with ivory and alabaster and gold from Egypt, amethyst from Syria, silver from Thrace, would be roughly equal in value to a year's ration of grain and dried figs for a hundred of the slaves in the royal textile factories.

Now, after the calculated pause, he appeared at last, surrounded by six of his palace guard, helmeted and armed with spears, who fell in round him as he emerged from the tent, men specially chosen for their height, which should exactly match his own – if they were taller, he feared it would enter the Songs that he was stunted of growth. The people of the Mycenaean League raised a shout at his appearance and their chiefs, Diomedes, Euryalus and Sthenelus, raised their arms to acclaim him. His brother Menelaus also shouted, as did the Spartan troops under his command. But many remained silent, so it was at best a ragged greeting he was given. Nonetheless, his darkly bearded face broke into a smile and he raised his right arm, the palm of the hand outwards, in acknowledgement. This smile showed the teeth, it was too broad for such scattered applause, or so it seemed to Calchas, and it was lasting too long. The guards held their spears upright, their faces without expression. The shafts of the spears shone in the sunlight, they formed the bars of a cage, and Calchas felt his mind touched by

[Same paragraph] gossamer wings. The King was waving and smiling inside a gilded cage. It was thus the mad were treated.

Agamemnon walked forward and seated himself, and the guards moved into place round the throne. Still he made no signal for the proceedings to begin, but remained for some moments silent and motionless, sitting upright, his back not touching the chair. He had taken care with his appearance this morning, Calchas noted – just as he had himself. His dark, lustrous hair, thick and shaggy as the mane of an Argive pony, was combed out to his shoulders and he wore a gold circlet round the brow to keep the hair from his eyes in this wind. His robe was dark blue, colour of royalty; it was held in by a belt, from which hung a long dagger in a scabbard of polished leather.

There was a pause, filled by the sound of the wind and the cries of gulls circling above. Then the King raised his arm and brought it slowly down again. Shouts broke out and the two champions came forward from their places on opposite wings of the assembled army, and walked down to the space marked out for them. Both were equipped with the standard conical helmet with bronze cheek pieces and nose guards, and both carried the round oxhide shield and the heavy thrusting spear. But the Boeotian was more heavily armoured – he wore a tunic of leather with bronze shoulder plates, and he had chosen as his second weapon the short, broad-bladed stabbing sword. Stimon the Locrian had no sword, but he had a dagger slung low on his right side. For body armour he had nothing but a short coat of padded linen.

The two men came together and turned towards the King, standing side by side, waiting for his signal. When the nod came they moved quickly apart to the limits of the space. And now for a while it was as if they had decided to mock each

[Same paragraph] other by imitation, circling with knees flexed, shoulders lowered in a crouch, spear points dipping slightly. For a space of time that was brief enough, but seemed protracted to Calchas, watching with the fascination of the fearful, the two circled each other on the shingle. They were lost to everything, they had stepped into a private world, from which only one would emerge to the life he had left – the waves, the painted hulls, the shit on the wind.

The movements were quicker now, from time to time the points of the spears snaked out in darting, feinting movements, caught by the sun in splinters of light. The Boeotian seemed stronger – twice his opponent took the shock of thrusts on his shield, heavy thrusts that briefly unsettled his balance. The sun of midmorning was still low enough to give a certain advantage to the one who had it behind him, and both men maneuvered for this position.

There comes always a moment, whether of fear, rage, confidence warranted or mistaken, when the first move is made, the definite one. Calchas knew this just as all those present knew it. Not a deliberate decision, but a sort of gathering, depending on the god that prompts. It came now. Opilmenos made the drill movements he had learned when scarcely more than a child, raising and lowering his shield sharply, at the same time stamping the right foot, ploys to distract the other's attention for a split second from his spear point. He now drove this forward with all the weight of his body behind it, a lunge that carried him forward three paces, the point raised as he advanced until it was aiming at a spot just above his opponent's collarbone.

Stimon could not block the attack altogether, there was too much power in it, but he swayed to the right a second or two

[Same paragraph] before the impact and thrust out his shield, so managing to deflect the spear across the right side of his body, not quite far enough, however: the point scored through the inner part of his arm, high up, just below the shoulder. He took two staggering steps further to the right, exposing his flank. The padded linen of his tunic was suddenly red to the elbow on the right side. He had kept his grip on his spear, but it seemed too heavy for him now, the point was hardly clear of the ground.

The sickness and exhilaration of prophecy fulfilled came to Calchas. This was the moment he had seen prefigured, watching the man dance in the firelight, the death contained in that fullness of life. It was what he had seen, what Pollein had guided him to see. As he waited now for Stimon to be killed he remembered that shaft of luminous conviction, felt some shivering return of it, the burden and tyranny of the god's favour.

The Boeotian's thrust had brought him too close to use his spear again without shortening his grip. This he now began to do, slamming his shield against his opponent's left flank to give himself time. The movement was well executed, in the same drilled and robust fashion as his first attack. But the stagger of the Locrian was transformed now, by a miracle of balance and coordination, into the first steps of a dance, taking him round almost in a half circle, helped by the push from the other's shield, until he was sideways to the Boeotian, who had shortened his grip on the spear but had to make a half turn before he could deliver the killing stroke. It was the standard maneuver, the only possible one, but he was destined never to complete it. Stimon dropped his spear and sank to his knees. In a single movement he drew the dagger from its sheath and made a wide, backhanded sweep with it. The blade flashed and then dulled, as it sliced through the tendons behind the right

[Same paragraph] knee. Opilmenos raised his face and opened his mouth wide and fell.

He was disabled, groaning and helpless there on the bloody shingle, crippled for life – with hamstrings severed, he would never fight again. Whether he lived or died lay with Stimon the dancer, who had won the bout by dancing and was dancing still, on his feet once more and stepping carefully and delicately around the fallen man, holding the spear he had taken up again.

He kept out of range of the other's hands, which might still have sought for his throat or his eyes. He was waiting for the moment when he could get a thrust at the neck or abdomen, areas not protected by the cuirass. He was waiting, but he was not in haste; it soon became obvious to all watching that the moment of the kill was being deliberately delayed, that Stimon was playing up to the spectators, putting on a show. The Boeotian knew it too. As the hope of mercy left him he found the resolution to draw the short sword from his belt, the only defence remaining to him.

And now, amid the continuing hush, it became a dance for two persons, Stimon swaying his hips and raising his knees and setting his feet with exaggerated care while the wind scattered the drops of blood from his shoulder widely over the pebbles; Opilmenos twisting his body round to follow him, making attempts to rise, striving to keep his eyes always on the weapon in the other's hands, because to look away was to acquiesce in his death. Then Stimon quickened his step, the fallen man could not gyrate quickly enough, the thrust came, piercing the side of the neck, entering deeply into the throat. When the point was withdrawn, Opilmenos moved still, but it was the pumping of his blood that moved him. The Locrian turned away, not towards the King – he did not give a glance to

[Same paragraph] Agamemnon – but towards his own people. Calchas heard, or thought he heard, the metal shoulder pieces of the dying man scrape on the pebbles. Then all other sounds, even the lamentation of the wind, were engulfed by the great shout of triumph that came from the Locrians as they broke ranks, their leader, Ajax the Lesser, to the fore, and surged forward to hoist the victor shoulder-high. Agamemnon rose to his feet, again smiling. The show was over.

[New paragraph and chapter] 3. Calchas remained where he was while the army began to disperse, while the corpse of Opilmenos was carried away. Poimenos, who missed no change in his master's face, saw now that it was ashen below the caking of chalk. Without knowing the cause, he made to draw nearer, but Calchas waved him away and sat motionless, head declined, staring down at the ground before him. How could he have been so deceived? He was the more shaken as this had been – or seemed – a private message, not a matter for public pronouncement but an assurance that he was still held worthy of trust, still had the favour of Pollein.

The moving body, the moving flames, the Singer at the edge of the firelight – perhaps that sightless one had seen more than he? Fire and dance, the briefest of things and the most lovely. But not the same... Was that where he had gone wrong? He

[Same paragraph] pondered it, eyes still fixed on the ground. The flame has no past and no future, it belongs only to now, it is born and leaps and dies, no other flame will exactly resemble it, though the number should be countless. Also the dance dies and cannot be reborn and no other dance will exactly resemble it, even though the dancer be the same. He had thought this consuming joy of life meant the death of the dancer along with the dance but Stimon the Locrian had killed while dancing and lived to dance again. Perhaps the god had wanted him to understand that the more intense the life the greater the power of death, and therein lay the divine contradiction. Or perhaps it had not been Pollein who had led him there, perhaps some other god altogether had directed his steps, visited him with that shaft of conviction, luminous and deceiving. Fear came with this thought, fear his familiar, the companion of his days, the nightmare fear of not knowing the sender, not knowing whom to placate. It was like the wind... he seemed to remember now that there had been laughter from somewhere in the crowd, or perhaps somewhere beyond. Laughter of men or gods? Had he simply been tricked, toyed with, or had his mistake somehow been necessary? And if so, necessary to whom and for what purpose? How could it be known? At least he had made no public forecast, he had merely hinted at knowledge, always a safe thing to do.

He was seeking to derive what comfort he could from this when he saw Ajax the Larger bearing down on them with his rolling gait, head and shoulders above everybody else, flanked by the usual group of sycophantic companions from Salamis, who were making a way through the crowd for him, jostling anyone who didn't move quickly enough. Calchas got to his feet as they approached and Poimenos followed suit.

[New paragraph] 'I wanted to have a word or two before we go in.' Ajax made a motion of his huge head in the direction of Agamemnon's tent.

'Of course.'

'I was against this fight from the start. These people will tell you. Speak up, was I or was I not against it from the start?'

'Yes, Ajax, you were, you were, right from the very start.'

'I said as much, I told Agamemnon how I felt. Did I or did I not? *Speak up.*'

'You did, Ajax, you did.'

'Well, events have borne me out.'

Calchas experienced the usual mixture of feelings Ajax of Salamis inspired in him, awe at his enormous strength and stupidity, fear of his erratic temper, a nervous, half-humorous sense of his dangerous absurdity. 'How do you mean?' he asked.

'Well, it has ended in a death, hasn't it? I said that would happen.'

'But it was a duel to the death, wasn't it? It was only to be expected that one of them...' He stopped short, becoming aware that the eyes of Ajax and those of the whole entourage were intently upon him. 'Well, of course,' he added quickly, 'it is undeniable that the Boeotian is dead.'

Ajax continued to look down at him in silence for some moments. He had unusually wide-open eyes, very short-lashed, light greenish-blue in colour, eyes that looked somehow stunned, as if at some point in the past, perhaps long ago, they had registered a shock of surprise so enormous that it had never been possible to absorb it. He seemed put out now and Calchas wondered whether he had been backing Opilmenos to

[Same paragraph] win. Like all exceedingly simple souls and some souls not so simple, Ajax easily set down his disappointments to something that needed mending in the general state of things. More than once he had been heard to say that the smell of shit that lay over the camp was due to faults in the positioning of the army.

'The waste of a life,' he said now. 'This Opilmenos was a good soldier. Even the other chap, the Locrian, has a wound that will take time to put right. In his sword arm too. As a military man, I can't see any sense in it. It is not quarrelling and threatening and blood-letting that we need. I've said it before and I'll say it again, what we need—'

'He has said it before and he'll—'

'Who is that fool interrupting me? I'll have your guts for garters if it happens again. What we need is something that will bring us together, something that will make us if not exactly friends...'

'Allies,' a rash voice offered – despite the fear Ajax inspired, there was always someone among his followers who tried to curry favour by getting in early with the right word.

'Blockhead, we are allies already. Good grief, I am surrounded by cretins. We need something to take the men's minds off this wind and as a military man I know what it is.'

'He knows what it is.'

Ajax raised a hand, extending a forefinger that looked to Calchas the size and shape of the sausages they made in Pergamum from goat guts and corn. 'Games,' he said. 'I intend to organize a Day of Games. Something never heard of before. It came to me in the form of a dream, which is why I have come to you with it, you being the chap best qualified in the dream department.'

[New paragraph] 'Well, I am at your service,' Calchas said.

But some shyness seemed to descend on Ajax now and he did not immediately relate his dream. 'There's bound to be winners and losers – that's life,' he said. 'But we will come out of it, you know, not friends exactly...'

'Closer,' Calchas said. 'With mutual respect.'

'That's it exactly, that's just the phrase I was looking for. Great gods, what it is to have a head on your shoulders.' Ajax's eyes were as dazed looking as ever but a glow had come over his face. 'Mutual respect,' he said, drawing out the syllables. 'I like that, as a military man I like it a lot.'

'We could have races,' one of the followers said.

Ajax turned on him and half raised a fist that was roughly the size of Poimenos' head. 'Numskull, there are races already. Everyone knows what a race is. I am talking about something completely new.' He lowered his hand, it seemed reluctantly, and turned back to Calchas, shaking his head. 'Thick as two planks,' he said.

'What was your dream?'

'I was throwing a javelin across the sea. The sea was dead calm, not like this one, there wasn't a ripple on it. I stood on the shore and I hurled the javelin with all my strength. I was waiting, you know, to see the splash, so I could judge the distance. I mean, I knew it was a mighty throw, but I expected to see a splash sooner or later. But there was no splash, the javelin flew up into the sun and disappeared. There wasn't a mark on the sea at all. Then there was a great crowd all round me and everyone was shouting, "Ajax! Ajax! Ajax has won the most points!" The shouts were still in my ears as I woke and it came to me that this was a message, that some god was telling me to organize a Games Day with different events, not just running –

[Same paragraph] I'm too heavy for running – javelin throwing, for example, and give points to the winner and the one coming second and so on.'

'This is a most important dream,' Calchas said. 'We have to attend on Agamemnon shortly, but when I have had time for reflection I'd like to talk to you about it. I see nothing offensive to the gods in the idea. And they are clearly favourable to a javelin-throwing competition as one of the events.'

A smile came slowly to Ajax's face. All expressions were slow with him and this seemed to be because of the great expanse of his features and the time it took for his moods to travel across them. 'I'm glad you see it in that light,' he said. 'I would win easily. There is no one else in the world who can hurl a javelin as far as I can. We could have a weightlifting event too. It is a pity that in my dream there was not more guidance about how to organize the points system. It must be groups, let's say the Spartans make one group, everybody tries to get points for himself and for his group, and then these groups...'

He paused and a frown spread over his face, replacing the smile. The fringe of ginger-coloured hair that lay along his upper lip bristled slightly. 'These groups, the people in these groups...' The frown deepened. 'I am going to ask Ajax the Lesser to be my partner in the project,' he said, 'when I see him. He has a head for figures.'

'Won't he be at the meeting?'

'No, he has had leave not to attend. He is with his Locrians, celebrating Stimon's victory. They'll be well on the way to getting drunk by now. He mixes with the rank and file too much, the officers should keep a distance, I've told him that before. I don't drink myself, it clouds a man's mind. Stand away from us.'

[New paragraph] This last was said to those clustered round him. He advanced and took Calchas by the arm in what was doubtless intended as a friendly grip. 'I don't know whether you've noticed it, but there are deep divisions among us.'

'Yes, I have, as a matter of fact.'

'I want to change all that. I want to bring the allies together. When we get to Troy, that will be the war process. Here at Aulis what we need is a peace process. I'd like to feature in the Songs as "Ajax the Unifier", the man who held the army together in the face of a hostile wind through the brilliant idea of a Games Day.'

'And so you will. I'll make it my business to speak to the Singer about this at the earliest opportunity. He is a foreigner like me, we are both from over the water, and so I have some influence with him as to what he includes. And what he leaves out, of course, which is sometimes more important.' In point of fact he had practically no influence with the Singer at all; between diviner and bard there was rivalry, both in their different ways being reciters, disseminators of stories; but Calchas lost no opportunity of encouraging a belief to the contrary, as it added considerably to his status in the camp.

'You will do that?' Ajax's grip tightened. 'I swear you'll not regret it.'

Calchas saw the large face, now radiant with gratitude, close above him. He was not himself a short man, but at this close range he had to crane his neck to meet the moist, emotional eyes below the unruly wisps and whorls of the brows.

'To approach him myself would be too lowering,' Ajax said.

There was no intention of offence in this, as the diviner knew. Ajax was rarely aware enough of others to want to offend

[Same paragraph] them, except when he got heated and then all he wanted to do was kill them. He had spoken openly and confidently, like a child. Calchas' womanly dress and painted face were like the plumage of some strange bird to him, perhaps exciting. And then, he knew the diviner had access, not only to the Singer's ear but to the meaning of dreams and the signals of the gods. And, more immediately important, he enjoyed the favour of the Commander-in-Chief.

'The Singer will require a gift,' Calchas said. His arm was beginning to feel numb.

'I'll give you a silver hairclip for him.'

Calchas nodded. It sounded an unlikely thing for Ajax to have in his possession. It might be plunder of course. Whether this gift would ever materialize was a matter of doubt to him, as was also the question of whether, if it did materialize, he would ever pass it on to the Singer. To his intense relief he felt the grip removed from his arm. 'He'll appreciate that,' he said.

'You might speak to Agamemnon about this idea of mine for keeping up the morale of the army. Just mention it to him, he listens to you. I don't want to speak to him myself, it looks too much like toadying. Why should I ask him for permission just because he has the general vote for Commander? Besides, we are related. My mother is Periboea of Athens, and she is a granddaughter of Pelops and Pelops is Agamemnon's grandfather. That makes us cousins of a sort.'

By now the crowd had thinned, there was nothing before them but the churned and bloodied patch of shingle, the swaying masts, the endless rearing and tumbling of the waves. It was time to present themselves at Agamemnon's tent. As they went, Calchas fell behind and loitered for a while, allowing Ajax to precede him. Not a good idea to enter together, he

[Same paragraph] thought. All such things were noted and might sooner or later be used against one in ways not foreseeable. He was still wondering vaguely, as he entered, why the family connection with Agamemnon should be felt by Ajax an impediment to easy speech.