

Excerpt from Penthesilea

X

The air was heavy with the sea, with sun—
she missed the thin, sharp breeze of home. She tried (225)
to call it back to her. Inhaling deep
and slow, her nostrils flared, she let her lids
drift down. Trees, world blurring between her almost
closed eyes. Yet it was not there—home. Not here.

The moist warmth made her leather leggings hang (230)
loose and limp off her thinning hips. She cinched
her golden belt again, tighter, around
her scarlet tunic. Food was not enough
to fill her.

Something else had changed. She sensed
strife—chaos—her eyes darkened:

Yes.

They whispered. (235)

Her heart pulsed, Arzas leapt forward, they galloped
and crested the hill—spread below was day
turned night. The earth, scorched black, sparkled with bronze.
The dead men glistened.

Suffering.

It called her.

XI

Twilight turned dusk turned night. This time, no fire. (240)

She laid her bed below an old black pine
then threw her sight out through the shadowed hush.
Arzas glanced up and watched her jump and pull
herself up, hand over hand, gripping each branch—
she pressed her soles against the tree's dark body. (245)

These wooden arms would hold her dreams tonight.
She settled, drifted, and released her mind.

Her eyes flashed open. Arzas snorted raising
his head. They both held still, listening. She heard
their breath before she saw them. There were two. (250)

Mouth breathing fools, she thought. Then they appeared.
One lashed a rope and tightened it around
Arzas. The other flung himself onto
the empty bed she'd made.

His fist-raised knife
fell hard and fast. He rammed and ripped all through—
blade searching for a body. (255)

Arzas screamed,
reared up and threw his captor to the ground.
Surarsiltea hawk-dove down her weight
and crushed the killing man. Her arms wrapped tight
around his neck. One arm moved up and squeezed
his head back while the other hand tore through
his throat. Her knife and hands shone, wet and warm
with life. (260)

She watched Arzas who with great leaps
pounced on his captor's head stamping his face
with his front hooves as if to put out fire. (265)

She moved to him and pulled him off the dead,
calmed him, calmed herself, then stripped the men
of weapons, coin. She did not know their armor.
Where was their camp?

XII

Sssssssssssss.

The shades hissed through her ears. They rode, now passing (270)
through ravaged lands. Burnt villages. And many,
many, so many bodies. Dogs and children,
some alive, half alive. Most dead and rotting.

XIII

An arrow whistled by her head. Another
came after. Arzas bolted sideways. Arrows. (275)
She saw no one. The ground shook. Men and horses
came. Arzas danced. They spun. No way. No out.
Soon soldiers everywhere. She drew her blades
and pushed forward.

A soldier ran at Arzas.
She waited for his head—her axe in hand— (280)
behind, another ran, arm high, with spear—
he threw and pierced the first.

He dropped.
She swung
Arzas around and saw this other man—

This man stared. Struck. Eyes fixed on her skin pictures,
red cloak, golden belt—her—he'd only seen (285)
the visions. Now he knew that she was real.

She did not know him—but she understood.
She chose her side.

A hawk circled above.
This strange man's horsehair crested helmet shone.
Behind, attacking men ran at him, blades (290)
up—
ready.

She aimed. First axe. Second axe
flew. Heads split, one—two.

Men came in all
directions. Calling. Grunting. Slaughtering.
She moved Arzas—they leapt in, helped to crush
a brutal enemy. Trusted a war not (295)
their own.

This war was chance. Her chance.
Shades hissed.

XIV

All was still. Blood pooled.

She remained. Her head
bowed, grateful to the spirits who had kept her
and Arzas standing. Men approached, waved hands
and spoke strange words. The noises floated, empty,
around her ears—she knew she was to join them. (300)
Follow them to Ilos.

XV

Inside the city.

XVI

A message man came. Spoke. He knew her. Knew
her people. Knew she was a queen.

Her tongue
burned, thirst shut her throat. Need made her legs weak. (305)

The message man led her around the city
led her to drink, to food, to sleep—he waited—
then took her through the colored city, brought
her to the highest mound. And so she passed
through its great doors. It was as if she entered
a ribboned mountain. (310)

XVII

A gold-crowned man sat
ahead—their king. She walked toward him through
his people, felt their eyes. He rose to greet
her. Raised his arms in welcome. Spoke strange words.
The message man stood by.

King Priam says:

(315)

Thank you—the city celebrates.

She'd fought
well—saved a son of Troy. *Helenus*—
stepped
forward toward her—she remembered him—
the circling hawk—the horsehair crested helmet.

Another man—the message man said: *Hector*—
came forward, held a helmet. The horsehair
sprung violently from shining bronze. She wanted
this light-lit thing. He stretched his arms and gave
this gift—honored this foreign queen. Her eyes
were dark and drawn. She met, held Hector's. Patient
and clear she asked for nothing—she accepted
the gift. Agreed to fight for Ilos.

(320)

(325)

XVIII

She rested.
Regained her force. They fit her with bronze armor.
The shades were quiet. Waited for their moment.

XIX

News came. Prince Hector of the shining helm
was dead. His body lost, dragged like a dog
away from home. (330)

XX

Arzas blew through his nostrils.
Content. He snorted. Her strength calmed. As one
they rode—gleaming, on fire inside and out—
through Ilos' gates.

XXI

The war cries sounded. Men (335)
beat shields. She scanned their ranks of soldiers—thick
and deep—her own spread out around her. Some
men rolled behind their horses. She would kill
these first.

She moved into position. Dropped (340)
and drove her spear into the earth. She started
with arrows. Arzas felt her lean and reach
into the *gorytus* that bound to saddle
held her one hundred arrows, small and light,
she fingered each one, watching the men, choosing
her target.

She chose. She placed. She drew. (345)
Sighted.
Released. The rolling man fell from his cart.

She chose.
She drew. Aimed for the neck—released.
She chose.
She drew. Aimed for an eye—released.

Again. Again. Again. Again. Again.

They all fell one after another. All. (350)
The men who rolled fell hard behind their horses.
Some screaming. Others bleeding. Every arrow
a death. No one could come near her.

She stopped.

Watched her last arrow fly and strike and kill. (355)
Her fingers ached. She shivered though the air
shimmered with heat. A faint buzz pierced her ears.
A hum and hiss:

Ssssssss.

So close. Yes. Now . . .

A squall of madness blew through her. The shades
gripped her their shrieks and howls scouring her lungs.
Her mind was emptied of itself and filled
with dark and lashing winds that rasped her bones. (360)

The fighting swelled and burst around them. Pressed
in, Arzas felt the heart in her legs quicken.
He reared. Ready. The sun blazed overhead.

She pulled her spear up from the earth with one
hand as the other pulled her blade. They leapt
into the slaughter. They became the slaughter. (365)

The field of battle was relentless sound.
She heard a chant rise up—men called a name,
called:

Akhilleus!

Again:

Akhilleus!

(370)

A great man winged with speed flew through the soldiers.
A violence that became the center pulsed.
His swinging shield caught the sun's rays and sent
them back out bursting skyward, rupturing day.

The shades deafened her mind:

Yours. Ours. It's time.

(375)

Surarsiltea saw the blinding flash
across the field, she strained to see what.

Arzas

knew. Knew to turn. To take her to the light.

She cut through man after man feeling nothing.

Mid-day came, went. She moved toward the center. (380)

No dust that churned around the heaving throng
could dull Surarsiltea's radiant helm—

Akhilleus caught a glinting movement
above the heads of other soldiers—one
moment of shine under the sway of plumes (385)
brought back the savage grief of loss—his friend
dead—gone. And hate flooded him—

Hector.

Vengeance
claimed his sight. Fury made his hands go numb.

He stalked her now. Surarsiltea turned
she felt the force of its approach—of rage. (390)