

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/4

James Hercules Sutton

Ithika After the Massacre

(Realpolitik Ending to Homer's Odyssey.)

From ev'ry corner of that crooked isle,
a wail of lamentation fills the air
as grieving kinsmen rage against the sky.
And then comes silence, as these angry men
prepare to bury kinfolk that they lost
& ponder the reaction they should make.
Keenly aware of why these men are riled,
Médon, the herald, noting silence there
anticipates the purpose in their sighs.
Though Zeus imposed a fiery truce on them,
their unabated anger now accosts
the solemn oath that they were forced to take.

What yet may happen now concerns this man,
who's charged to warn of danger to his land.

A hate that never ends is what they face--
each doing nothing to obey their King,
and he reacting badly from his throne
till death's the only respite for their land.
If all these people do is hate & groan,
if they withdraw consent & act like stones,
indiff'rence will bring ruin & disgrace
far greater than what Fate conspired to bring
when They returned Odyss'us, all alone,
to punish arrogance with his own hand.
Pulling the bow, he made the suitors moan,
fulfilling prophecy they would atone.

But now his people face a direr fate,
a life with no alternative to hate.

The herald calls assembly. Up and down
across their fractured land, he sees them come

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armed to the hilt. They swarm into the square,
ready for anything, except for calm.
Simmering anger rises ev'rywhere.
The King himself attends the hue & cry,
as is his duty, when he hears the sound
the herald makes when something must be done,
or when some beastly danger slithers there,
or when there's need to cure some lasting harm;
but deadly silence greets him & their stares.
Sensing the risk that tempers yet may fly,
 Médon lifts up the speaking scepter tall,
 takes it himself & offers prayers for all.

"Hear me, O Zeus, Great Father of us all,
your children rage in tumult. Show the way
all can resolve their anger. Show us how
the sum of what we want can be achieved
without more diminution in our ranks.
Grant us the will to offer up a cure
that satisfies all int'rests. And we call
upon Our Father, asking Him today,
to grant us full relief from what is now
afflicting ev'ry man. Answer our need,
and we shall offer You unending thanks
& sacrifice a heifer, white and pure,
 so You will know our feelings are sincere
 & of the gods, it's You we hold most dear."

Zeus grants his pray'r. Athena turns to face
Her mighty Father, and the goddess frowns.
"Father," She says, "all this is a disgrace.
Why do you suffer them to gather 'round?
If *they* decide, how will *Our* will be done?
If they're allowed to do what *they* think is best,
they'll soon forget their fealty to One

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Who gave them breath & hope & all the rest.
A single thunderbolt would end their grief
& set this hero high upon his throne
as he deserves; that man has earned relief,
rather than one more grief to face alone.

Decider men are known to choose misdeeds;
and when they don't, for Us they have no need."

Zeus turns his head & smiles, and then he speaks:
"Listen, my daughter, all will turn out right.
We're not abused by what these people seek,
for what they seek is pleasing in our sight.
These Greeks weren't ready to control their fate,
when You decided to set Helen straight;
But doing so set back the future date
when men might choose the course the future takes.
Being responsible makes men more free
to take Us in their hearts. We let them choose;
Heaven is strong enough to let them be.
Our will be done, no matter what they do.

Your hero might use one more prophecy;
but after that, We'll work invisibly."

The people mull about, but no one speaks;
inextricable loss gnaws at their hearts.
And each is overwhelmed by clawing need
for retribution, since the price he paid
was loss of sons & kinsmen. Some are numb,
repressed by oaths that they were forced to take
after that lightning bolt fell from the peak
of Mt. Olympus. No one wants to start
a frank discussion flowing from the deed
that ravaging Odyss'us lately made.
They're wary, too, of ravages to come
& of the course the gods might choose to take.

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Turning their faces to'rd their oldest man,
they look to him to speak of how things stand.

Old Polychronis takes the rod to speak.

"Hear me, you people. God spared us more blood;
there was no need for any more to die.

But He removed the choice from our own hands.

A single thunderbolt was all it took
to smother justice. Oh, yes, there were some
who had ambitions that were indiscrete;
some wanted to be king. Others were rude
& stayed too long, when it was time to fly.

Some chose the company of other men
& had no time to give a girl a look.

But his return meant all of that was done.

All that was needed was one royal word
to pay back what was taken; none was heard.

"Instead he took their lives, though some chose well
& pled for peace, when others raised the roof.

His punishment was far worse than the crime,
and people here still suffer from its cost.

Our hearts won't heal, till justice evens out.

*That is the only remedy I see;
if others know another, let them tell."*

But no one speaks. The people stand aloof,
crossing their arms in anger, biding time,
as each remembers what each one has lost.

Odyss'us whispers to his son, who pouts
& mutters a retort impatiently.

Wise Halitherses, near, takes all this in.

Taking the rod, he speaks of what has been.

"I am the Ithikan who utters truth.

I challenge this assembly. I express

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whatever news Olympus deigns to send,
not knowing why—to tease us, I suppose,
since no one ever seems to pay much heed.
Even when warned by Zeus, by God Himself,
men fail to change their ways or change their minds.
People are stiff-necked creatures, pushing on
against self-int'rest, till that fateful day
when recompense arrives for what they did.
The suitors, for example, proud & bold,
refuse to listen, when I warn of doom.

 The king is not much better, sails for gold
 & heaps of glory, after he'd been told
 "that all he'd ever gain was endless grief.
That man was stubborn, had to have his way.
He plugs his ears to holy prophecy,
as if his will or spirit could prevail
against what had been ordered by the Fates
or gods around Them. 'Total utter ruin'—
that was the outcome he was told he'd find,
and that's what happened—all his sailors dead
& ev'ry suitor slaughtered by his hand,
the island *twice* denuded of its sons—
and all for glory, all to buy him fame.
He paid its price, and so did all of us.

 He might have spared us, if he'd cared to save
 the children of his countrymen from graves.

"But he preferred his glory to their lives,
as if his spirit mattered more than theirs—
driven by some demanding god, no doubt,
the same one who put warning in my words
& goaded me to speak my gloomy piece,
although She said it wouldn't do much good.
And so it proved: Now widows mourn their sons,
and grief commands this crenelated rock,

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where only goats can prosper & no horse
has ever gleaned a living from its slopes.

So men prefer to canter over waves,
to graze a living out of piracy,

 since there's not much to trade. They sail with fools
 & kings who lack the temper'ment to rule,

“red-haired adventurers who lust for doom
& have the wit to captivate our will.

Ours was a pirate, moving ships around
to where advantage offered him a chance
to fill his treasure room with pretty things
& only secondarily a king.

He was too lenient with us, after all,
and love is lost on those who don't respond—
who cross their arms in anger when they hear
a just rebuke & bare a stony face.

Revenge is what he brought us, that & ruin,
and all that's left for him to give us now
 is more of both. There's blood at ev'ry door;
 nothing will thrive, if he remains here more.

“So he *must* sail, but where *I* cannot say.

Perhaps some god will prod me to disclose
what you don't care to know, given your stares
& my reluctance to again express
what no one cares to pay attention to: . . .

*Let him seek Menelāus in his lair
& sit with red-haired Helen at her loom,
as she spins tales of Egypt & the drug
she drops in wine to keep her husband calm.
Then let him sail past Hercules, to where
the natives worship trees, are painted blue,
and never row for plunder or for fame.*

Fair penance, to sail off without a crew
to where nobody knows what sailors do.

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*“An oar upon his shoulder, let him come
to where the implement he bears is strange,
where fields are green & meadows always wet,
the better to cool ardor that is his.
And let his son keep order, if he can,
or marry Nestor’s daughter & live there.
And let Laërtes die up in the hills,
now that the grieving men he fought are dead.
And let Penelopé complete his shroud
& wrap it gently ‘round his crooked feet.’*

And let the rest of you pretend you’re free,
as you chase goats around here endlessly.

But as for me & saying what will be,
I never more will utter prophecy,

“because the wickedness in men endures.
The game is rigged; the worst will win the prize.
Whoever grabs the crown will not be pure.
Our future promises what men despise,
yet more perversity in man’s affairs.
The unacknowledged Something that we heed,
the Emptiness absorbing what we dare,
emulsifies all hope & makes us bleed.
Some call It ‘Fate,’ and others something worse:
a Titan wearing horns & crimson tail.
To me, It seems an evil so dispersed
that any name we give to It must fail.
The Thing’s inside us, chewing equipoise,
unless it’s just the consequence of ‘choice.’

“But what is known of this appointed task?
Does it arise within or from without?
Does it erupt from vacancy & lack
or leap with exultation & A SHOUT?
Does it express good character or flaws?

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Is it a saw for hewing what we can?
Does it reveal the melody we are
or bring cacophony to what we plan?
Free Will is too complex. We think we know
that 'what we do' we do because we can;
but even heroes, bound for glory's show,
have no idéa what propels a man.

*No one can say if Action, Heart & Thought
produce whatever fate we think we've got.*

"And even these are more than we can use;
in consequence, we're here feel abused.
I ought to make this clearer. Here it is:
We live for disappointment. That *one* lives
is unimportant. What's important is
a race endures as long as *any* live.
But 'any' can continue *only* if
a race *remains* within the range *within*.
When creatures pass their limits, then they're done.
When reach extends past hope & scope is filled,
The End is near. That's why I couldn't teach
even *one* hero to exceed his will.

Not even *he* can be *all* he can be.

Nothing we do can ever set us free.

"We are *ourselves* the object of our scorn.
We are the ache we struggle to surpass.
We are the *source* of evils that are borne,
evils that much too soon have come to pass.
We are but creatures with desire to live
from one lack to another. In our lack,
we ache for spirit, hoping it will give
new spirit for the essence taken back
when we were cozened by demands inside
& chose to listen. Nothing we demand

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can serve to fill the gaping hole we hide,
the Thing inside that will cannot command.

We are the source of ev'ry mournful song;
we are the reason things go dreadful' wrong.

"There's no defense against what *has* to be,
no charm against a Thing that has no name.
Blackness & Dissolution endlessly
encapsulate each life, despite one's fame
or holy station. Life keeps running down,
as what it lives on, essence, grows more dim.
Nothing but ambiguity abounds;
the very air around us glows with sin.
But I won't make excuses. He was *wrong*
to elevate himself past what was *right*.
He was the source of trouble all along.
He was the grief that pulled grief into sight.

He strung the bow that made this island moan.
He is the reason ev'ry mother groans.

"Yes, I will *dare* to say it; I will *dare*
to charge that he exceeded his command.
I'll allocute it all, despite your stares,
and mention what he *did* to his own land—

- *evils* he did for riches & for fame;
- duties he *shirked* that he was *bound* to give;
- *choices* that brought his kinsmen *grief* & pain;
- *vengeance* that *shattered* those he should forgive.

Be *gone*, you maniac of endless war,
you *scourge* of innocence, you sword of *pain*.
You brought us *madness*; now you bring us *more*.
Climb in your boat & sail away again.

We have no *need* for glory or for fame.
We live for *happiness*; you for your name.

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"Now *there's* a thought, a land that's full of joy,
where happiness springs up abundantly
& hope is real & not a royal ploy;
where children have enough & men can see
how peace is grounded on one simple rule,
that neighbors should be treated as one's self;
where kings don't treat their counselors like fools
& privilege does more than larder wealth;
where royals add improvement to each life
& youth has opportunity & hope;
where wives find happiness, released from strife
ruling a land when governed by a dope.

But I digress, because I cannot see
how such utopia could ever be.

"Men don't need more illusions; men need truth,
though I have learned that truth won't set us free
except from what is false. 'Real' is uncouth
& stirs up trouble, since it tends to ruth-
lessly pit us at ourselves, against high
int'rest, which we're here to fail. By reaching
up for hands that are not there, ever sigh-
ing for what we can not grasp, by teaching
the goodness we pursue can never be,
truth has no purpose but to steer our lives
into a channel where a keel can't find
fathom enough to set its rudder loose.

Such is the brine I will myself to mull,
when I consider that my life is dull.

"I ought to have more faith, believe in life,
assert the goodness God has placed in man,
but I cannot. I've witnessed too much strife
to think that those in charge are other than
contestants in a field of braying beasts

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locking their horns together for a prize
that offers neither honor nor relief.

A herd is too susceptible to lies
to be entrusted with collective fate;
and the alternative is just as drear,
a ruler who believes that *he's* the state
& *birth* gives him the right to commandeer.

That way lies madness, death & cruelty;
I mention these, because he gave all three.

"And now, we come to this, his Judgement Day.

I count my blessings, since I needn't dare
to make suggestions causing men to stare—
except for one, . . . that he must sail *today*.

Because of him, who never offered help
to those he left behind, our best are gone.

Death takes no holiday, when things go wrong.

I heard him tell Telemachus, his whelp,
'I hate to leave when you are losing.' 'No,
not losing,' said his son; 'I bear *your* cost;
another day like this, and *I* am lost.'

The king looked innocent & mumbled, 'Oh,'
as if *he* were the victim. Numb to loss,
he's still can't fathom what his fame has cost.

"Empty our hearts, Athena; purge their files;
it's impolite to leave a heap of trash.

Erase all memories of perjured miles.

Remove the spark that made our hero flash.

Reduce his fame to our disheveled state.

The man I tried to reach, the man in charge,
ignored all prophecy about his fate
until too late, and now his royal barge
drifts rudderless. . . . No reason to drone on;
a far, far better thing to be ignored,

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when listing names of heroes who went wrong,
than preach a revolution to the bored. . . .

We have no need to store his name away;
he gave us nothing that we care to save.

“We have two choices now: die or endure.
We can’t, like Daedalus, grow wings & flee.
And there’s no place to go: Nestor’s not cured;
he begs Athene for glory, endlessly.
Save us from blind ambition, men who seek
to elevate themselves at our expense.
Give us a shepherd, one who serves the meek,
who aches for peace, who offers us his best.
Till he arrives, our only choice is ‘wait.’
Till then, I’ll state men’s wishes & desires—
and plead to heaven for a better fate
than heroes who make choices that prove dire—
because a prophet knows the future brings
fulfillment to the words that prophets fling.”

A rumble through the crowd provides assent.
The men stamp loudly, hitting shields with swords;
and this continues, till the hero climbs
into their midst, to answer what he’s heard.
He looks magnificent with sword & shield;
Athena has supplied the man with grace.
Telemachus looks bold, as is his bent
now that he’s turned a man & cut the chord
tied to his mother, reaching manhood’s time.
Holding a spear, he’s standing at alert.
Even Laërtes, down from distant fields,
balanced on crooked feet, commands his place.
The royals look magnificent to see,
just as Athena wanted it to be.

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The hero takes the speaking rod & waits,
so silence can anticipate his say.

Then he begins: "I was the victim here;

I was the one demeaned by insolence.

I was the *cure* appointed by the *Fates*;

Heaven made *me* its scourge for infamy.

I had no *choice*; Fate set a certain date
for ev'rything to happen Their own way.

Things are not always as they may appear.

You say that *I* have caused this pestilence,
but *you're* the ones behind this dismal state.

You *still* refuse responsibility.

Even your prophet chooses to evade,
refusing prophecy that he once gave.

"And none of *you* is blameless. *You* allowed
long years of lawlessness to rule the state,
though you were many & the lawless few.
You are the reason *why* they chose to roar.
You raised them *badly*, giving them *no* thought
of what might happen after mean intent;
and now, you've reaped the evils that you sowed.

You brought about this catastrophic fate
that you now lay on *me*. *Why* did you choose
to look the other way, when from my stores,
rats took away whatever could be got?

That was the reason Heaven's wrath was sent.

And yet, you blame *me* for your grief & woe,
when I just did my duty, as you know.

"You also know I acted for your good,
to win a better life. You lacked the means
to live in comfort, so I sailed for gold
that you might purchase all the things you need.
'Good for the greatest number' ruled my thoughts.

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That's why I sailed to Troy. There I was used
badly by Heaven's endless thirst for blood.
Through novel forms of death in novel scenes,
I moved around & did as I was told.
When gods demand, how can a man not heed?—
despite whatever ruin might be got.
The truth is *all* of us were sore abused
by being playthings for a pantheon
that used us badly, till good lives were gone.

"I've had enough of that, and so have you—
not that we could or should attempt to shirk
the due devotions ev'ry man should make.
But only *we* should choose the things we do.
We should decide the course that we should take.
We don't need prophecy for what we do;
each can decide, each one or as a crew.
Decision frees us from the doubts that lurk
along the route we took or didn't take;
spares us from asking if our course is true;
releases us from scuttling plans we take;
absolves us from remorse in deeds we rue.
We best serve brooding gods on whom we call,
when we become responsible for all.

"So let us take our fate in our *own* hands
& do whatever thing *we* think is best.
Should things today remain the way they are?
Or would you change a governance that's grown
beyond your tolerance & instant need?
If you require a king, that's what I'll be;
but lasting peace across this stubborn land
depends on loyalty, which I now test.
You may be right that things have gone too far;
but if you lapse to hate & endless moans,

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your bitterness on bitterness will feed,
as each devours his own heart endlessly.

So what's your pleasure? Shall I be your king?
Or will you try some democratic thing?"

The crowd erupts. With one voice, they shout "sail,"
over and over, banging on their shields,
stamping in tumult with their sandaled feet.

Assuming pow'r themselves, they make a choice
& choose what *they* think best, as *they* see fit.

Old Polychronis takes the speaking rod
& answers gently, for his face is pale,
facing the weapons that the royals wield:

"You & the gods can bring us to defeat;
but *none* has pow'r to force us to rejoice,
even when threatened by an angry god.

If you remain, our spirits will *stay* sick.

We'll think of what we lost & then blame *you*,
even when you are right in what you do."

Odysseus sees there is no other choice.

He's lost consent; without it, he can't rule.

He whispers to his son, who bends to hear
& is assigned to bring provisions down;
these soon arrive. A small boat by the shore
is commandeered & fitted out to sail.

A sacrifice is made, but none rejoice
as Halitherses raises up his tool
& slits the heifer's throat. An eagle near
soars to the right & overflies the town;
it makes one shriek & then is heard no more.

The King embarks into a seething gale.

Men watch him from the shore with icy stares;
he disappears. Penelopé isn't there.

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Men hack the meat to pieces, unappeased.
Mentor, observing, takes the herald's stick.
These men are still too close to doing harm
to make an uneventful journey home.
Unsatisfied by what they've seen today,
they're sick at heart. A teacher knows the way
a heart can rupture or a mind can seize
when Fate arrives to play a grievous trick.
These men are ailing; none of them is calm.
For though their King has sailed, again to roam,
they're left behind again, again to pay
the dismal price demanded by his stay.

So Mentor takes the herald's stick to speak
about the attitudes that they should seek.

"'The tragedy of life,' I heard him say,
'is not that we grow old; if truth be told,
only our bodies fail. Essence remains,
as long as mind stays healthy. Youth persists,
until disease, grave wound, or accident
lays lassitude across a sailor's bones.'

That's what he said, before he sailed away,
to comfort me, occluded, growing old,
nesting within this bowl of aches & pains,
wondering if I'll last till they desist.

My youth is gone, my spirit also spent,
and lassitude denies me breath to moan.

But I take comfort knowing I will cease;
a teacher knows the goal of life is peace.

"Away with old man's thoughts. The sea still yearns;
old prophecies still rattle in our brains;
and in his woods above us, rats still race
to winnow profit out of forest spoil.

Cold wind exposes bristles in their fur,

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as winter's urgency compounds their greed.
I, too, am foraging, for words that burn,
hoping their heat can cauterize my pain.
I, too, feel cold, accelerate my pace
& paw excitedly at what lies coiled
in dry encrusted shells, hoping to stir
something with nourishment to slake my need.

Such are the burrs that open to my call,
as I seek comfort from his final fall.

"My love is off so far her image fades;
my city wallows in a sea of lies.
Cold words no longer satisfy; they come
gamboling down the same wave that I chose
when I embarked to populate a cause
that promised glory & the hope of rest.'

But I suppose that's how all lives are made,
shuffling between elation & a sigh,
until that final shudder proves we're done
& what remains gets planted in a row,
along with ev'ry hope that ever gnawed
across our knowing, spawning our distress.

Feelings that we endure cannot be saved;
hopes that we entertain drown in our graves.

"Some say that when we die, we live 'beyond.'
I take no comfort in that cold caress.
A god that's just is not a god to fear;
a god that isn't ought to be ignored.
And as for resurrection, there's no need,
since one life is enough, more than enough.
We cannot know what happens, when we're gone;
and I lack inclination now to guess.
That anything 'remains' remains unclear;
and if it does, past feelings won't restore.

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Our recitation of this hopeful creed
creates the numbness that it would rebuff;
 and I have taught it. But I can't complain;
 I did my best, hoping they'd do the same.

"I tried to teach them ev'rything I knew
& wound up teaching all I didn't know.
And they taught me how living here would be
after they'd grown to their maturity:
acres of rats & lusting plutocrats,
competing for the right to spawn their greed.
There was no good in what they chose to do:
They put their teeth where teeth should never go,
and now they all lie buried. I can't see
how any sort of peace can ever be,
if you demand revenge for killing rats.
They gave no service, and they paid no heed.
 I tried to teach them what they ought to know;
 perhaps I failed, or maybe they were slow.

"Compared to rats, our hero wasn't bad.
He'll be remembered, here & far away,
for seizing what he wanted, lasting fame,
which now perpetuates what once was him.
Such is the only hope a hero knows:
to be remembered, when he falls to dust—
a sullen 'victory,' since it looks sad
compared to breathing air for one more day.
But there's a respite in it, just the same:
A man who lights a spark that never dims
will be remembered, when, at last, he goes
under that final wave, as all men must. . . .
 The eulogy we heard was much too rough;
 on what he did to us, not rough enough.

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"I'm no curmudgeon. I don't criticize
from deadly habit, hoping to be heard.
I'm not compelled to tear down what is high.
I honor truth; I elevate what's sound
& winnow for the best: I toss the bad
& offer better ways of serving good.
I slice Oblivion to human size,
the only sort of war that's not absurd.
Perhaps someday I'll leave my sword untied,
if better days arrive & joy abounds.
To 'cease from troubling' — that's the goal I had
& what I offer here to those who'd feud.
 Anger will only multiply our grief;
 peace is our only chance to find relief.

"Therefore I say, 'Long live our argonaut!'
May all his troubles cease. May he find rest,
a joy he never had. And may Athene
persist forever by his roving side
to save him from debasement from such souls
as grub for nuts or pray for duller ends
than lasting glory that Our hero sought.
And may he choose his fate as *he* thinks best,
as he continues on his sea of dreams
till he arrives where happiness abides.
Let 'he who wanders' reach his final goal,
a land where battered sailors heal & mend.
 Peace be to our great hero, and adieu.
 Pity the grief that he has brought us to."

A murmur ripples softly in assent.
Each eats his fill, then goes to his own place
to contemplate what he has seen today.
The dead are buried, but their hope endures,
a chance for happiness across their land.

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Grief eases, too, as each of them returns
to self-appointed tasks, to add his rent
to the collective treasure of his race
by doing his own work in his own way.
Anger abates, as peace provides a cure
for blind ambition raging in one man
who mustered them to war for fame he yearned.

Now shunning glory for security,
they opt for safety in obscurity.