Book 16

Bk XVI:1-100 **Patroclus asks to fight in Achilles’ armour**

As they fought on around the benched ship, [Patroclus](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexOP.htm#Patroclus), hot tears pouring down his face like a stream of dark water flowing in dusky streaks down the face of a sheer cliff, returned to [Achilles](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexA.htm#Achilles), leader of men. Noble Achilles, the fleet of foot, saw and pitied him, and spoke to him with winged words: ‘Why are you crying like a little girl, Patroclus, like a child running by her mother’s side, begging to be carried, clutching at her skirt to make her stop, and tearfully looking up until her mother takes her in her arms? Your teardrops fall like hers, Patroclus. Have you bad news for the [Myrmidons](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexFGHILMN.htm#Myrmidons) or myself, some tidings from [Phthia](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexOP.htm#Phthie) known to you alone? [Menoetius](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexFGHILMN.htm#Menoetius), [Actor](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexA.htm#ActorMenoetius)’s son and [Peleus](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexOP.htm#Peleus) son of [Aeacus](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexA.htm#Aeacus), our fathers, are both still alive, men say, Peleus among his Myrmidons. Their death indeed would grieve us deeply. Or do you weep for the Argives, dying by the hollow ships, because of their presumption? Say, now! Don’t keep it to yourself: let us both know.’

          Then Patroclus, great horseman, you groaned heavily in reply: ‘Achilles, son of Peleus, mightiest of the Greeks, restrain your indignation now great sorrow is come upon them. All our best men lie by the ships wounded by arrow or spear thrust: [Diomedes](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexBCDE.htm#Diomedes), [Tydeus](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexRSTUWXZ.htm#Tydeus)’ great son, [Odysseus](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexOP.htm#Odysseus), the famous spearman, [Agamemnon](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexA.htm#Agamemnon) too, and [Eurypylus](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexBCDE.htm#EurypylusEuaemon) with an arrow in the thigh. The healers, skilled in the use of herbs, are busy trying to cure their wounds, while you, Achilles, remain stubborn. May such anger never possess me as grips you, you whose useless valour only does harm to all. How will posterity benefit, if you fail to save the Argives from ruin? Pitiless man, you are no son it seems of [Thetis](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexRSTUWXZ.htm#Thetis) or the horseman Peleus, rather the grey sea and the stony cliffs bore you, with heart of granite. If in your mind perhaps some prophecy deters you, some word of Zeus your divine mother relayed, then at least let me take the field now, leading the ranks of Myrmidons, so I may be a saving light to the Danaans. And let me borrow that armour of yours, so the Trojans might take me for you and thus break off the battle. Then the warrior sons of Achaea, in their exhaustion, may win a breathing space: there are few such chances in war. We who are fresh might easily drive a weary enemy back to their city from the ships and huts.’

          So Patroclus made his request, fool that he was, for his own doom and an evil death were the certain answer to his prayer. Fleet-footed Achilles, answered passionately: ‘Ah, Zeus-born Patroclus, what words are these! I know nothing of any prophecy, nor has my divine mother relayed any word from Zeus, my heart is simply gripped with deadly grief, because a man has chosen to rob his equal, and snatch his prize, given the power. A deadly grief: and my heart has suffered deeply. The girl the Achaeans chose for me as prize, the girl I won with my spear when I took her walled city, Lord Agamemnon snatches from my arms, as though I were some exile without rights. But let us call all that past and done. It seems my anger wasn’t fated to last forever. I said indeed it would end when the sound of battle echoed about my ships. So then, now that a dark cloud of Trojans hems in the ships so closely, and we Greeks, confined to a narrow space, have nothing left at our backs but the shore, clad your shoulders in my glorious armour, and lead my Myrmidons, who love a fight, to battle. It seems the whole of Troy attacks us fearlessly, now they can see no sign of my helm, its visor gleaming in their faces. They would soon fill the river-beds with their dead, and not be warring round our camp, if Agamemnon were but warm towards me. It is not some spear in Diomedes’ hands will save the Greeks from ruin, nor that hateful voice, I fail to hear, of Atreus’ son, shouting his head off. It is man-slaying Hector’s call that rings in my ears as he urges on his Trojans, their cries that fill the plain, and they who conquer the Greeks in battle. Yet you must take the fight to them, and save the fleet from ruin, Patroclus, for our means of escape is lost once they set fire to the ships. Listen while I give you my advice, and you can win glory for me, and recompense from these Danaans, the return of that lovely girl and fine gifts as well. When you have driven them from the ships, come back to me. Even if [Hera](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexFGHILMN.htm#Hera)’s lord, the Thunderer, grants you glory, don’t press on against the battle-loving Trojans on your own: that will only lessen my chance of honours. In the heat of victory, as you lay about the Trojans in this fight, don’t make for Ilium, lest a god from Olympus comes to join the fray, for [Apollo](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexA.htm#Apollo), the Far-Striker, loves them greatly. Return to me, when you have lit your light of deliverance among the ships, leave the rest to drive the enemy over the plain. By Father Zeus, [Athene](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexA.htm#Athene) and Apollo, I wish the Trojans death to a man and the Argives likewise, and that we two might survive the ruin, to pry loose Troy’s holy crown.’

Bk XVI:777-867 **The death of Patroclus**

So long as the sun was high in the sky, the volleys of missiles found their mark, and men fell, but when it sank low at that hour when ploughmen unyoke their oxen, the Greeks proved masters of their fate. They dragged [Cebriones](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexBCDE.htm#Cebriones)’ corpse away from the Trojans and, beyond the clash of arms, stripped it of its armour. Then [Patroclus](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexOP.htm#Patroclus) was minded to destroy the Trojans. Three times that peer of swift Ares attacked them, shouting his dread war-cry, and each time killed nine men. But when, like a god, you charged at them again, Patroclus, then your fate loomed in sight. For [Apollo](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexA.htm#Apollo) met you, terrible in combat.

          Apollo advanced, veiled in a dense mist, invisible to Patroclus in the tumult, stood behind him and struck him in the back with the flat of his hand. The warrior’s vision spun, as Apollo knocked the helmet from his head, sending it under the horses’ feet with a clang, and the plumes on its crest were streaked with blood and dust. The gods had never allowed it to be fouled till then, that horsehair-plumed helmet that protected the godlike brow and head of [Achilles](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexA.htm#Achilles): now Zeus let Hector wear it for a while, since death was nearing him too.

           The long-shadowed spear, thick, heavy and strong, and tipped with bronze, in Patroclus’ hands was wholly shattered, the tasselled shield on its strap fell to the ground, and that blow from Lord Apollo, son of Zeus, had loosened the breastplate. Then Patroclus’ mind was dimmed, his noble limbs were slack beneath him, and dazed he stood there. A [Dardanian](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexBCDE.htm#Dardania), [Panthous](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexOP.htm#Panthous)’ son [Euphorbus](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexBCDE.htm#Euphorbus), the best spearman, horseman and runner of his generation, who had brought down twenty charioteers in this his apprenticeship in war, now cast his sharp spear and struck Patroclus in the back between the shoulders. He was first to hurl his spear, not killing you, horse-tamer Patroclus, but pulling the ash spear from your flesh and running back into the throng, fearing to stand and fight you, unarmed now though you were. And Patroclus, stunned by the god’s blow and Euphorbus’ spear, retreated into the Myrmidon ranks, dodging fate.

          But [Hector](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexFGHILMN.htm#Hector), seeing brave Patroclus withdraw, struck by the blade, made his way to him through the ranks, and drove at him with his spear, piercing the lower belly and ramming the point home. Patroclus fell with a thud, to the grievous sorrow of the Achaean army. As a lion in the high mountains may fight with a tireless wild boar over a trickling stream from which both seek to drink, and conquers his panting enemy by strength alone, so Hector, Priam’s son, overcame the valiant son of [Menoetius](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexFGHILMN.htm#Menoetius), who himself had killed so many men, and striking him close at hand with his spear robbed him of his life. Then straddling him, he shouted in victory: ‘I think you boasted you’d sack our city, Patroclus, take our women captive, sail with them to your native land. How foolish! Hector and his swift horses are here to fight for them, Hector the finest spearman among the warlike Trojans, I who shield them from the day of doom, while as for you, the vultures shall have you. Even Achilles, with all his valour, could not save you, wretched man, though I don’t doubt he told you as you left, for he chose to stay: “Patroclus, master horseman, don’t return to the hollow ships till you’ve pierced the tunic at man-killing Hector’s chest and drenched it in his blood.” No doubt that’s what he said, and you in your madness though it would be so.’

          But though your strength was ebbing fast, horse-taming Patroclus, yet you answered: ‘Boast, while you can, Hector, for Zeus and Apollo it was who gave you victory. They conquered me: they stripped the armour from my shoulders. If twenty men like you had faced me alone, all would have died at the point of my spear. But [Fate](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexFGHILMN.htm#Fates) the destroyer and Apollo, [Leto](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexFGHILMN.htm#Leto)’s son, have conquered: only then came Euphorbus the mortal, while you are but the third to claim my life. This I tell you: and go brood upon it. You indeed have only a little while to live, even now death approaches and your fixed destiny, to fall at the hands of Achilles, peerless scion of [Aeacus](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexA.htm#Aeacus).’

          With these words death took him, and his spirit, loosed from his limbs, fled down to Hades, bemoaning its fate and leaving youth and manhood behind. But dead though he was, noble Hector still replied: ‘Patroclus, what makes you so sure of my swift destruction? Who knows but Achilles, son of fair-haired [Thetis](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexRSTUWXZ.htm#Thetis), may be struck by my spear first, and lose his life?’

          With this, he planted his heel on the warrior’s body, drew the spear from the wound, and thrust the corpse away, to fall on its back. Then he launched himself with the spear at [Automedon](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexA.htm#Automedon), godlike squire of fleet-footed Achilles, grandson of Aeacus. He was keen to strike him down, but the swift team swept Automedon away, those immortal steeds, the glorious gifts the gods gave [Peleus](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexOP.htm#Peleus).