

Three Poems

by [Robert Heard](#) (July 2021)



Ulysses and the Sirens, John William Waterhouse, 1891

Ulysses, Home at Last

Tiresias spoke through blood-stained lips:
'Go where men do not know ships;
Leave your long-sought home and shore;
Take in your hand a useless oar,
And search until you find a man
Who takes it for a winnowing fan.

'You, being you, will soon devise
The journey's necessities I call lies,
For all your stratagems and tricks,
Like oars and fans, to me, are sticks.'

Ulysses grew old—now it seemed too late

To leave home again, to follow fate
As he'd done before, from land to land:

Till again from the Dead, the seer's command
Ascended through Lethe's shrinking mist—
'It's now or never. You'll not be missed.'

He wandered through the wilds of Thrace—
They thought the oar was a spear or mace.
Hermits among the Cappadocians
Knew an oar had to do with oceans.
In the torrid zones he saw men laugh
At an old sailor who used oar for staff.
On the ice of Ulthim Thule's shores
Fires were fed with flotsam oars.
In the Elysian Fields, not far from Hades,
'Fans and Oars' was a game for ladies.
On Styx he saw from the lurid grove,
Souls ply oars that never move,
Back and forth beneath a bare mast.

Then he returned to Ithaca at last.

Still with waves the sea-god mocks
The shore twice-left, the barren rocks,
The wooded fields, now mostly weed,
Pale in leaf, black in seed.

Strange faces look, but by their eyes,
It's nobody they recognize:
Here, no more come ships with oars,
Since the late and distant wars.

He drove the oar into the sand that saves,
Speechless before the wind and waves.
It was tall and straight, beside the man—
They thought it was a winnowing fan.

Sta Viator!

‘What’s to do? Shall we go see
the reliques of this town?’

Twelfth

Night

Stay, traveller! Stay at home!

Too late. . .

You’re on the road to another Rome:
To stand in ancient theatres, bent
Over piles of stone without cement;
And learn by ruins, from Incas to Gauls,
They all made decent standing walls.
Where fountains, once, danced and played,
No sadder empty than when they sprayed.

Gaze, traveller! Dome after dome!
Though a Roman wouldn’t, being sick of Rome.
And cling by a wall to block the sun;
Plan your day, nibble a bun:
For if ducks can duck and swans can swan,
You too can duck the crowds at dawn,
Then proudly hunch with swan-like spine
Closer to the front of a waiting line.

Patience, traveller! You’re a speck in the comb,
Dragged through the hoary hair of a Rome.
But do not ask which road is home—
You know all roads must lead to a Rome.
And what would you do, where you call home,
That, not yet built in a day, will be Rome?
For wherever you are, and in spite of the view,
Since you are in Rome, be a Roman too.

With Two Left Feet

To introduce his Danse Macabre,
To what tune does the Master of Ceremonies
Gather his strangers and cronies,

Whom he calls with his abracadabra?

We shuffle on, with two left feet
To do what we've not done before;
Rise shyly to directions and signs;
Form straggling circles and lines
On the vacant, eddying floor,
Where to dance is to lose your seat.

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Robert Heard was born and educated in Toronto, Canada, and is retired from work in the city's library system. His avocations are poetry, and illustration.

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