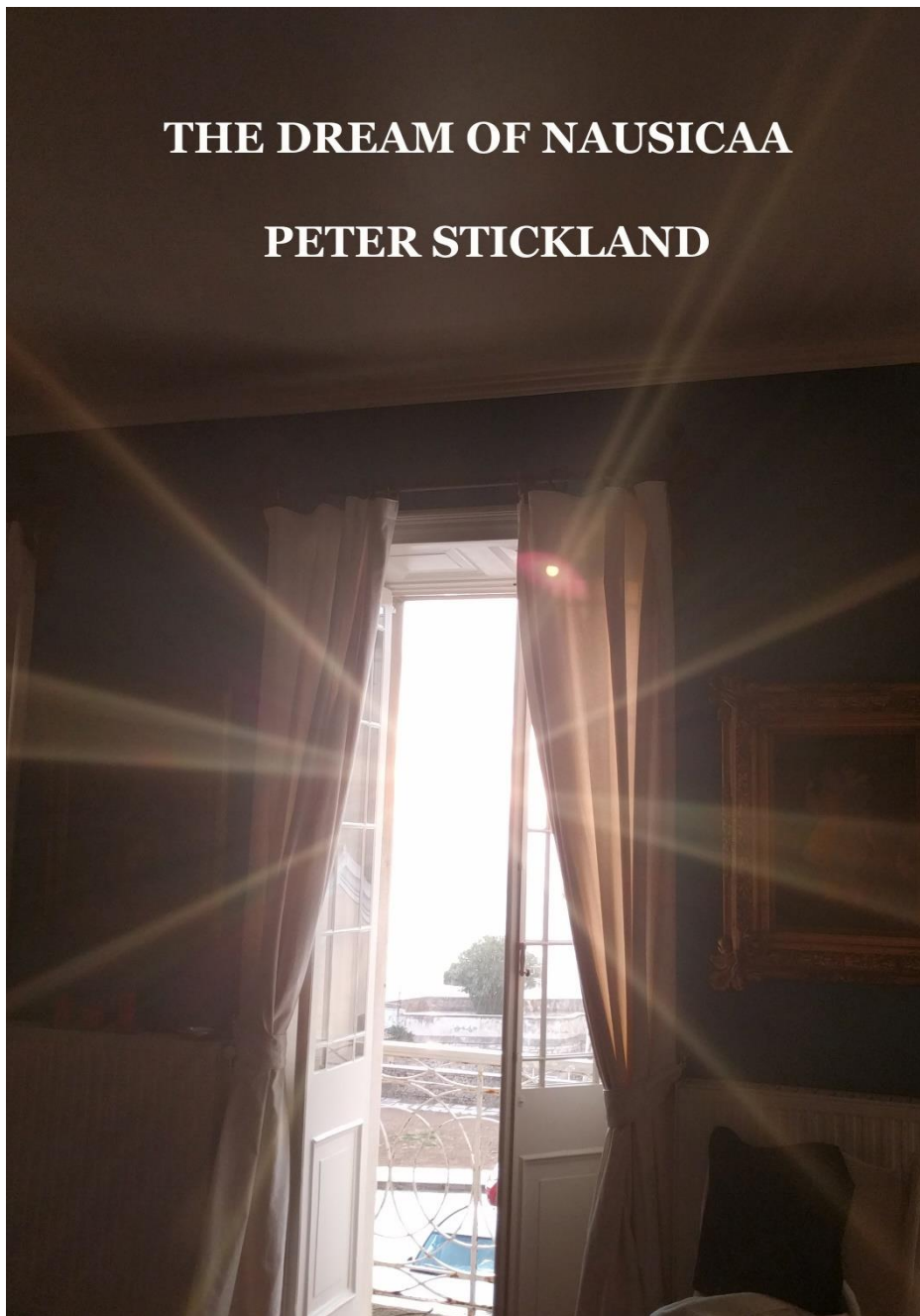


# THE DREAM OF NAUSICAA

PETER STICKLAND





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## Introduction

This is an excerpt from the *Odyssey*, the epic account of survival and homecoming. The poem tells of the return of Odysseus from the Greek victory at Troy to Ithaca, the small, rocky island from which he set out twenty years before. It was a central theme of the Trojan legend that getting home again was at least as great a challenge for the Greeks as winning the war.

Odysseus has to create himself anew, acquiring again all the signs of identity and status that were once his. After spending his final seven years with the enchantress, Calypso, she gives her reluctant blessing that Odysseus can return home. He builds a raft and sets off across the sea, only to be hit by a storm aroused by his great divine enemy, the sea-god Poseidon. He narrowly avoids drowning and manages to reach the shore of Schería, now called Corfu, a lush, isolated island inhabited by a race of magical seafarers, the Phaeacians. Through his encounters with the Phaeacians, Odysseus gradually recovers his former status. He gains the help of the Phaeacian princess, Nausicaa, who provides him with clothes and directions, and he makes his way to the court of their king, Alcinous, where he is welcomed and promised transportation back to Ithaca.



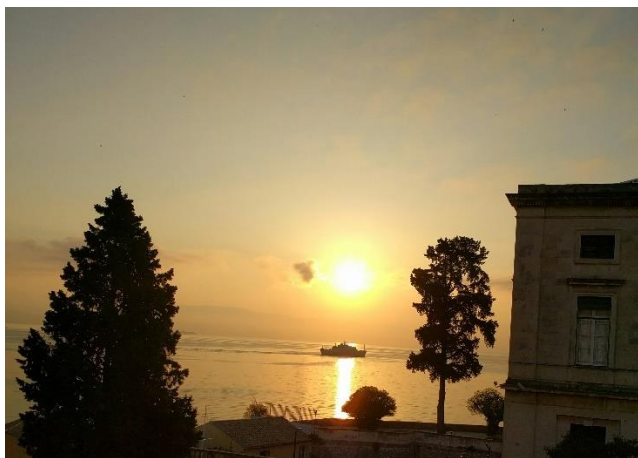
While the king's daughter, Nausicaa, a young woman of grace and dignity, lay asleep in her bed, a spirit came to her with less commotion than the gentle wind at her window and whispered in her ear.



‘Careless Nausicaa, how can you let so many garments lie unclean when your wedding day is so near? You must go to the river before the break of day and wash all your aprons, gowns, and veils.’



So Nausicaa awakened and went to her parents to ask if she may have a coach to bear her clothes to the river for washing. Her father commanded his servants to provide mules and a coach and her mother ordered fine provisions for nourishment and a goat-skin bag filled with wine.



Nausicaa took the reins and drove with her maids to the river. There they unharnessed the mules and set them free to graze. With the garments immersed in the river, they trod them rigorously until they were clean. The washing complete, the women dried themselves, left the fabric drying in the sun and sat to enjoy their refreshments.





The maids then played with a ball while Nausicaa sang sweetly to them. Suddenly, they saw Odysseus come boldly out of the sea, stark naked, as he was forced to do. The sight shocked them and they ran, all but Nausicaa, who stayed and covered her eyes.





Odysseus picked up a branch to cover himself and gazed at her, imagining she must be a queen; such beauty she had, such poise and majesty. ‘A thousand apologies,’ he said. ‘To approach you like this is not my intention.’



‘I have been twenty days at sea and three days in storms. The winds eventually threw me overboard, casting me here ashore with nothing but my skin. Pity me, dear queen, give me material to hide my nakedness and tell me where I might seek refuge in your fair city.’



‘You seem an honest man,’ Nausicaa replied, ‘and since misfortune has befallen you, I will find clothes for you and escort you to the city. Wash yourself in this river while I ask my fleeing maids to fetch you something to wear.’



Nausicaa strolled off, singing happily, and Odysseus fell into a dream, a dream that Nausicaa's singing had stirred in him. He lay in the river talking quietly to himself and then he wandered up and down the beach to dry his body.



‘It is better to contemplate the meaning of these things alone,’ he told himself, and as soon as he made this decision, he heard a noise directly behind him. He turned and on seeing Nausicaa, he jumped, then she jumped.



In later years, it was Odysseus's most vivid impression that her eyes, after she had come upon him thus strangely on the sands, could give him the kind of embarrassment that kept him dumb in her presence for more than a minute.





It was those eyes – the eyes of a woman born and bred by seas unchanging, yet never the same; unfathomable, yet always inviting to the guess, the passionate surmise – that told him first that here was a maiden made for love.





Hers was a figure tremulous with a warm grace, a countenance perfect in its form, full of natural gravity, yet quick to each emotion, turning effortlessly from the pallor of sudden alarm to the flush of shyness.



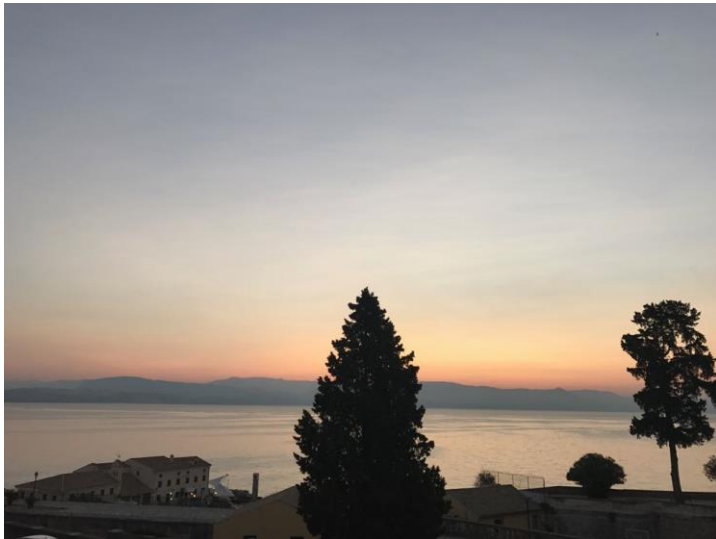
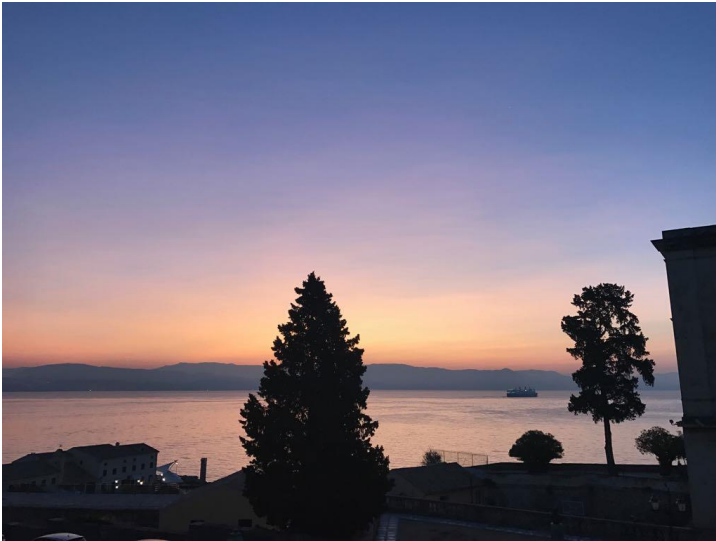
The mountains had stood about her, sheltering and nourishing her, and now she shone like a flower from those hills. Had she been the average of her sex, he would have met her straight and square; instead there was confusion in his utterance and in his manner.



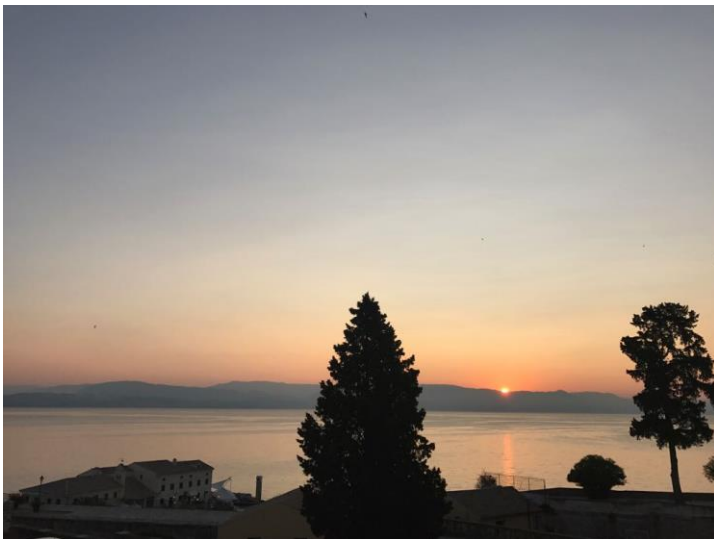
Odysseus bowed very low. ‘Madam; pardon! I – I – was stirred by your singing, and ...’



Her silence was accompanied by a smile that saw the mirth in the ridiculous nature of this chance meeting. Her stately calm and proud sobriety caused him to make a statement much bolder than he had expected.

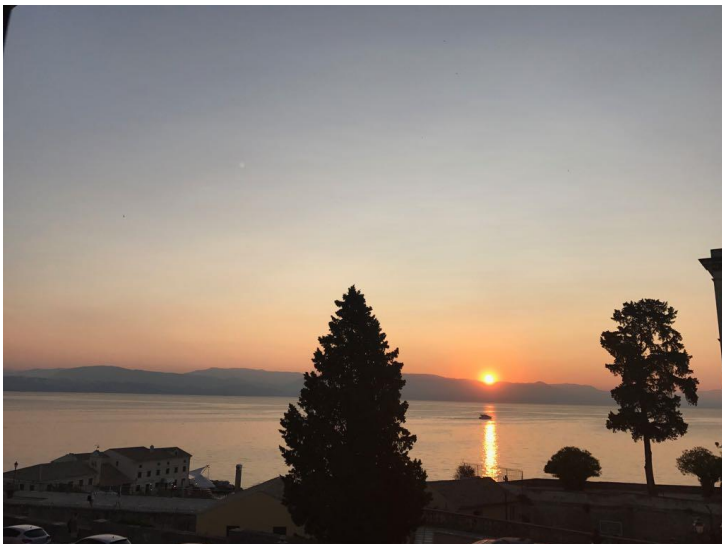


‘I was aroused by your singing and imagined I floated above the sand. It now seems appropriate, with your kind permission, that I return to earth.’



His foolish words did not quite reach her for the wind eddied noisily along the bay. The light was now throwing the clouds apart and the dark cloud that had previously gulped up the blackness, slowly dispersed.





Perhaps she did not hear, perhaps she did not fully understand, for she hesitated more than a moment as if pondering, not a whit astonished or abashed, with her eyes directly upon him.





Odysseus wished he had lived a cleaner life. He felt there were lines upon his face, betraying him. Nausicaa's heart was in her eyes, even Odysseus could see that, and he stepped back as if making a move to re-enter the sea.



‘I was just ...’ he began and stopped, not knowing what he should say to explain himself.



Nausicaa knew he was bound for home, that he was intent upon returning to his wife. She could tell by his restlessness and because he padded quickly about as if the sand was burning the soles of his feet.



With barely two drops of blood in her lips, Nausicaa tried to laugh and failed. Taking something from her pocket, she half held it out to him. He did not understand at first, for though he was smart among men, he was slow in the ways of women.

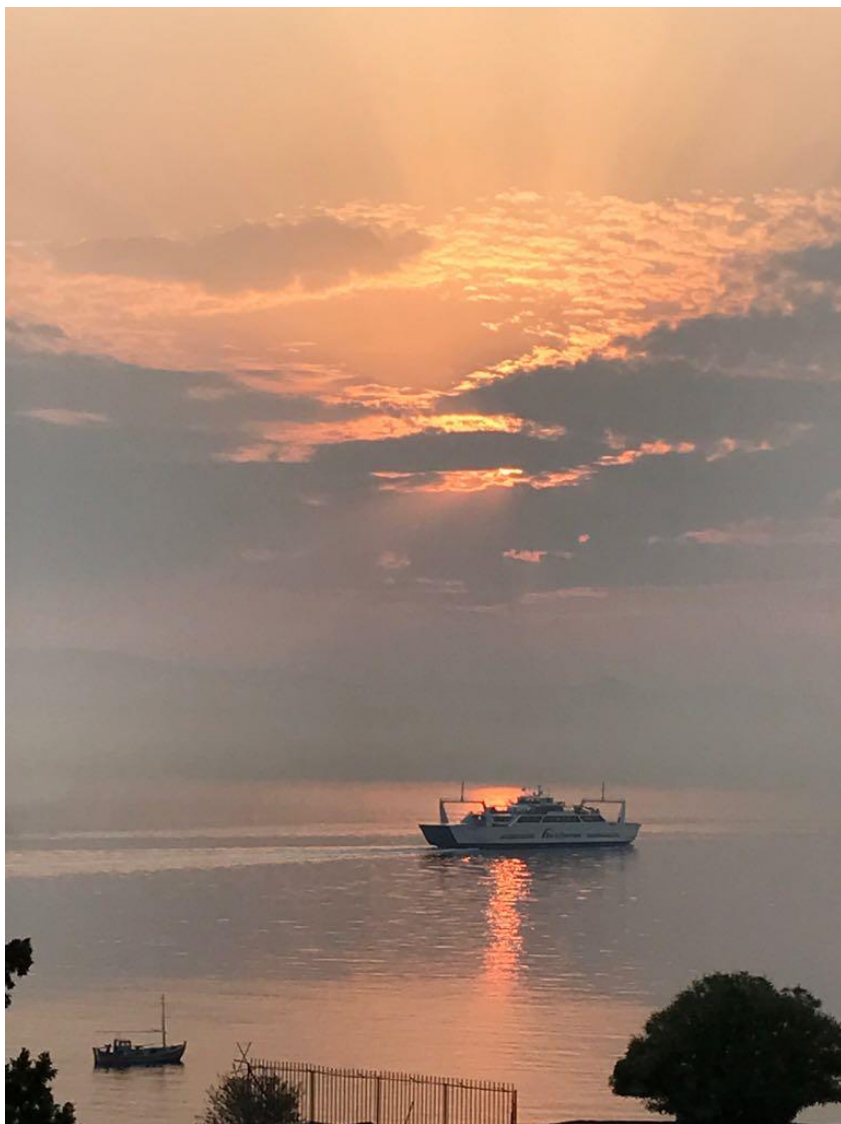


‘It’s foolish I am,’ Nausicaa began. ‘I do not know why I do this, but I had a strange dream last night, and in it I was told to give you this...’



Odysseus could not get the meaning of her laugh, strained as it was. He was thinking that maybe the young woman's reason was wandering when, suddenly, she placed a square piece of cloth of a woman's sewing into his hand.



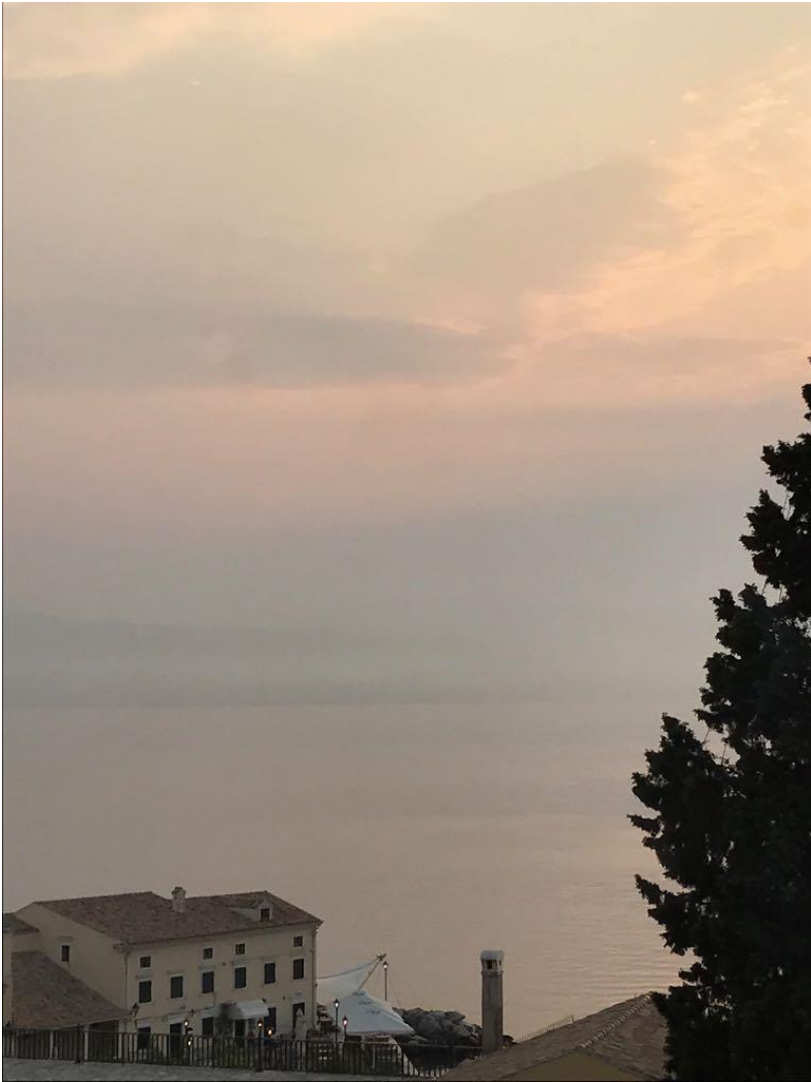


Before he could guess the meaning of her actions, his fingers closed upon it and he felt there a coin. He opened the cloth, held the disc up and saw an ancient piece of the king's gold.





Nausicaa's eyes sparkled and Odysseus understood everything then. First, he kissed the gold and then he kissed Nausicaa. So gentle was the feeling they shared, they could have been floating.



Hearing her maids running across the sands she turned to them, but they stopped a little distance off. ‘Why be so shy,’ she scolded, ‘do you think the man will carry you off? By evil weather he was forced to come to this land. Have you brought him clothes he can wear to the city?’



As the maids walked towards Nausicaa, she turned to Odysseus. ‘On this island, it is our habit to live lightly. Singing, shipping and cooking is our pleasure; we have no other art. As for anything that might cause disagreement between us, we care not a pin for it.’



With this she took the clothes from her maids and handed them to Odysseus. While he dressed he became afraid that men would censure him, asking why a handsome fellow from God knows where was accompanying Nausicaa.

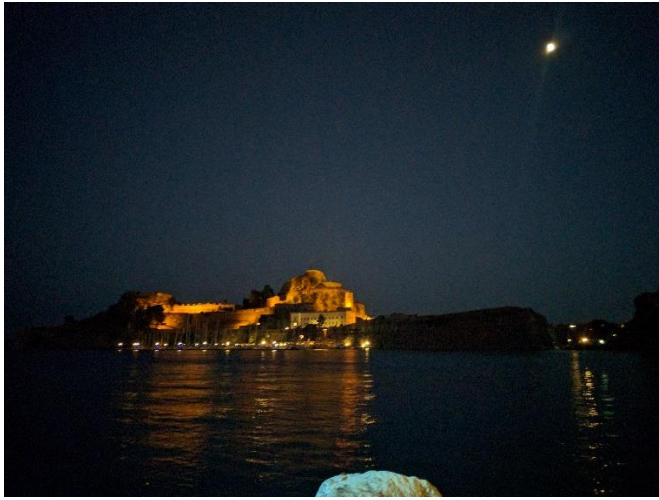


Where did she find him? Must he marry her? Is he from some far country newly landed here? Is he wandering to seek his fortune? Maybe he is a God descended from heaven to live with her always. Does she think no-one is good enough at home? All the best men here seek her.



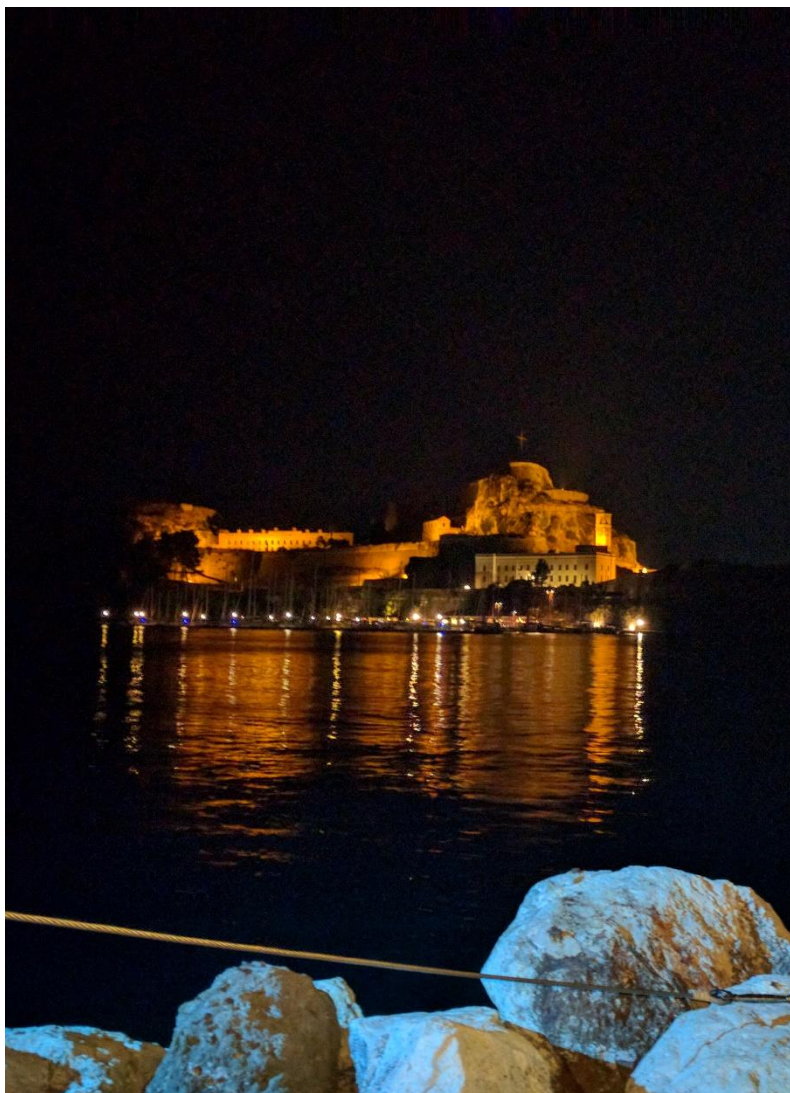
‘Kind sir,’ Nausicaa declared, ‘It will be to your shame and mine if we are seen riding together; you should enter the city alone and as a stranger if you mean to be conveyed by my father to your home.’ Odysseus, alert, took her in.



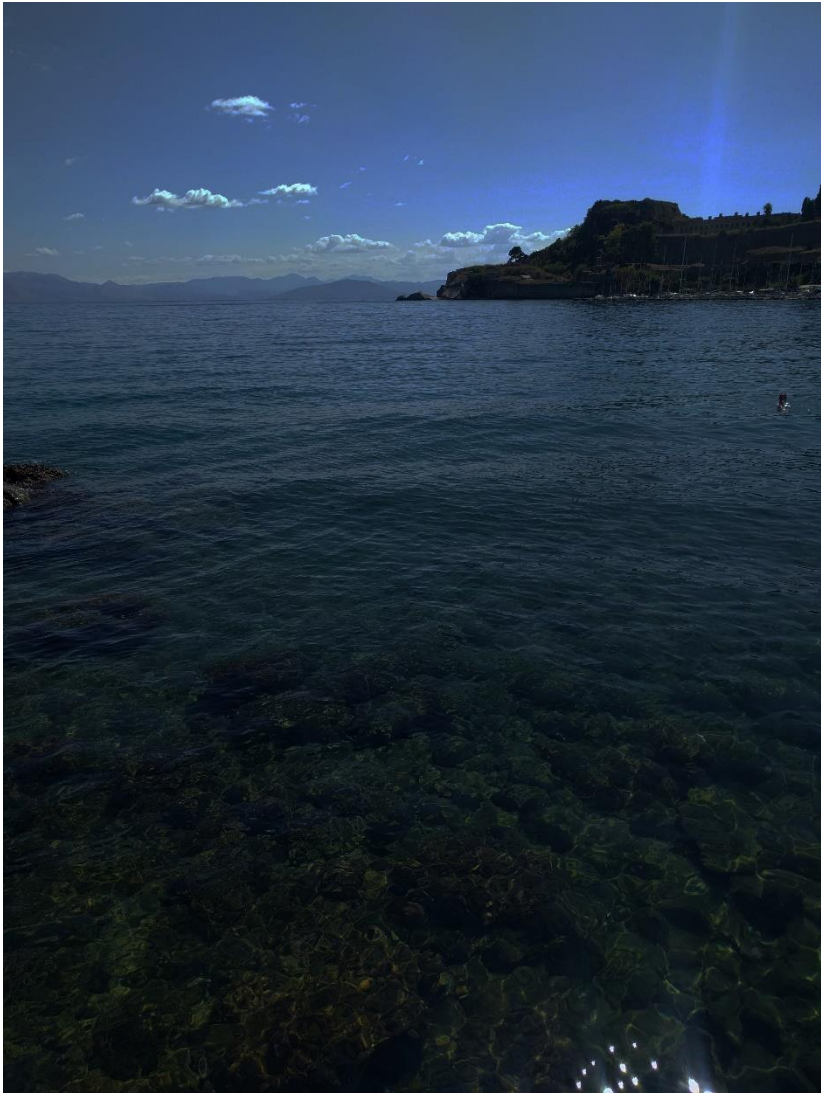


‘Do as I tell you. When you are near the palace you will see a grove of poplars and when you have arrived you will see my father’s vineyard. You shall meet a child there. Ask him to take you to the place where Alcinous can be found.’

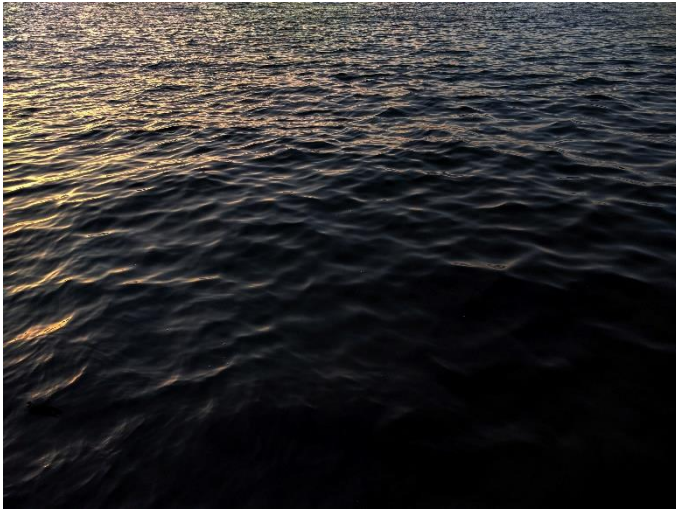




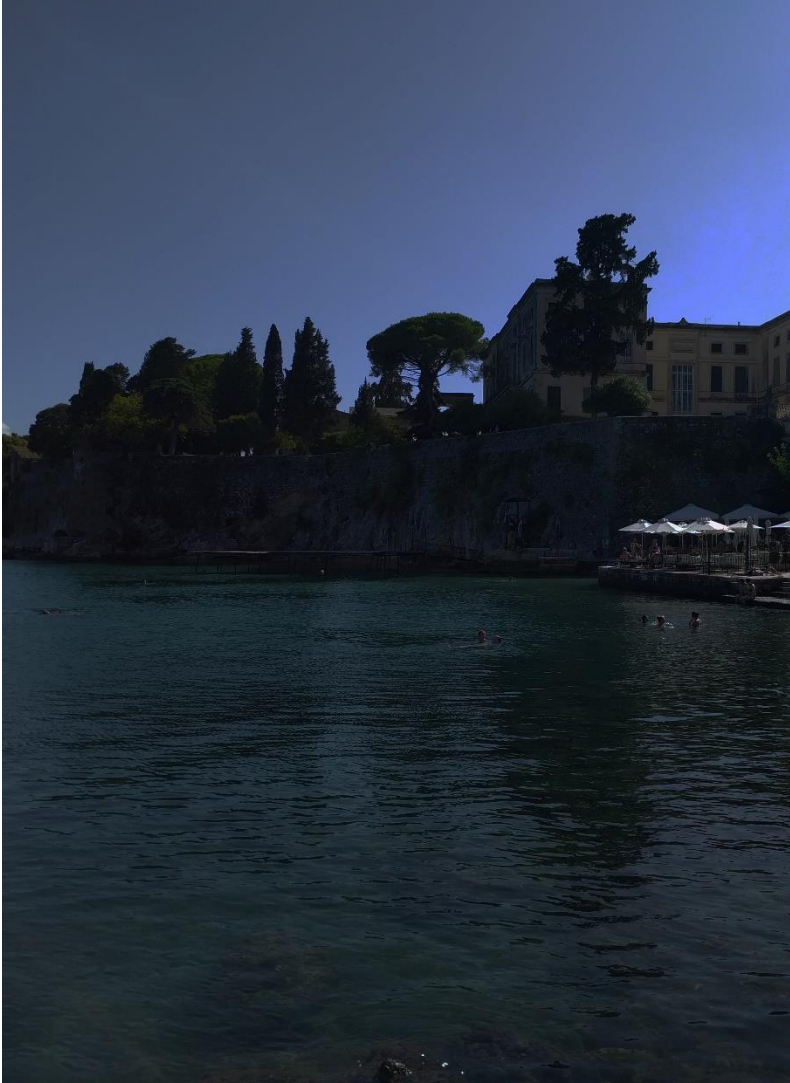
‘Go in and on, until you find my mother sitting by the fire-side, spinning. My father’s chair will be close by. Pass by it to my mother, kneel before her and lay your hands on her knees. If you can win her favour, you will gain your wish to be given your passage home.’



‘Farewell, stranger, guest. Even in your own land you will remember me! For you owe me the price of your life.’ This said, Nausicaa turned away and Odysseus, a shiver down his spine, his tongue dumb, flicked the whip. The mules moved swiftly from the riverside and the maids followed on foot.



‘There is no finer place for love than here,’ she told herself. ‘Here, where the little stream enters the wider bay, it is possible to sit upon the sand and love as the bird loves, unnoticed. For a couple to be seen in the town together is a sure sign that a wedding is at hand.’

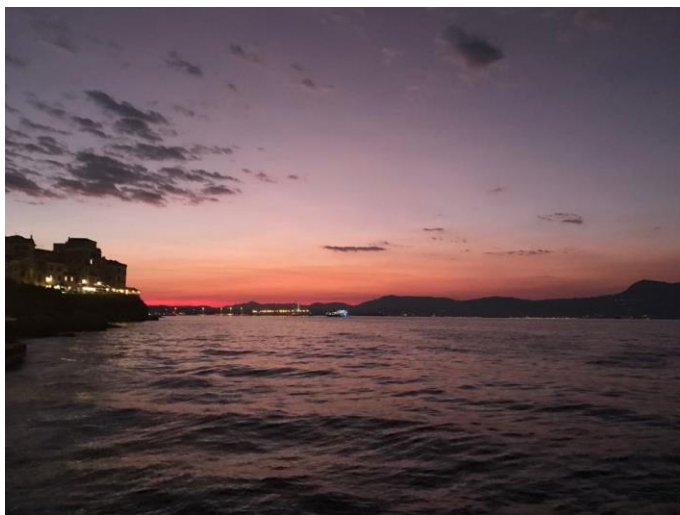
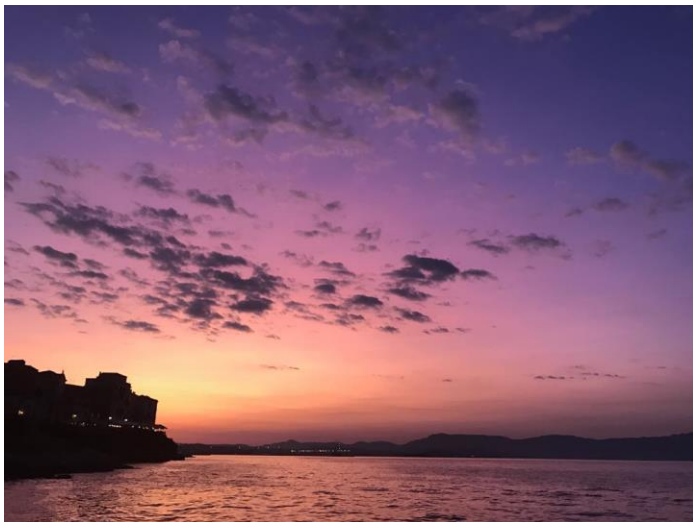


Nausicaa sat in a moored boat and gazed across to the mainland. She imagined she was out at sea in an enchanted boat with her husband at the tiller. She snuggled up beside him, glad to be in his arms, singing, her voice in his chest.



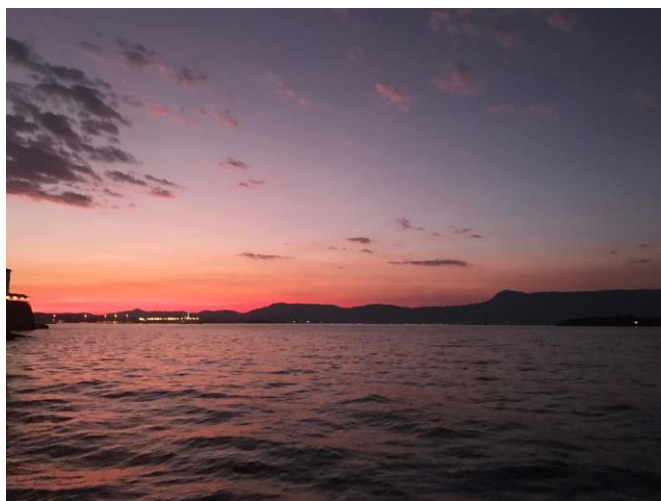
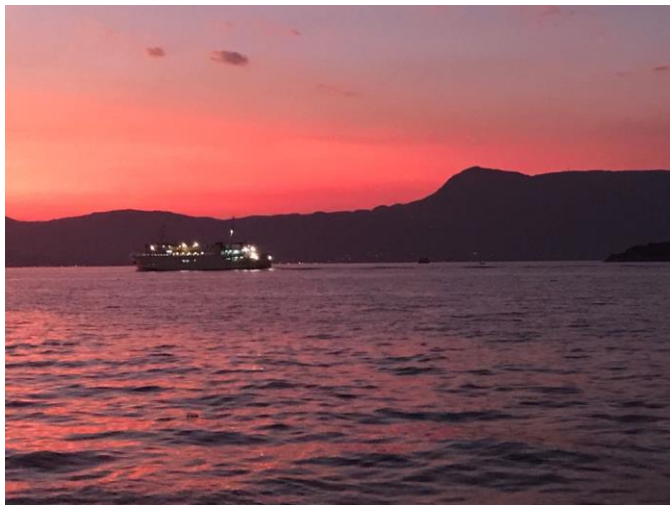
Together, beautiful and free, they nestled into this boat and glided like the wild, white swan, round the coast and into lonely creeks, where only from the cliffs could her wedding song be heard.



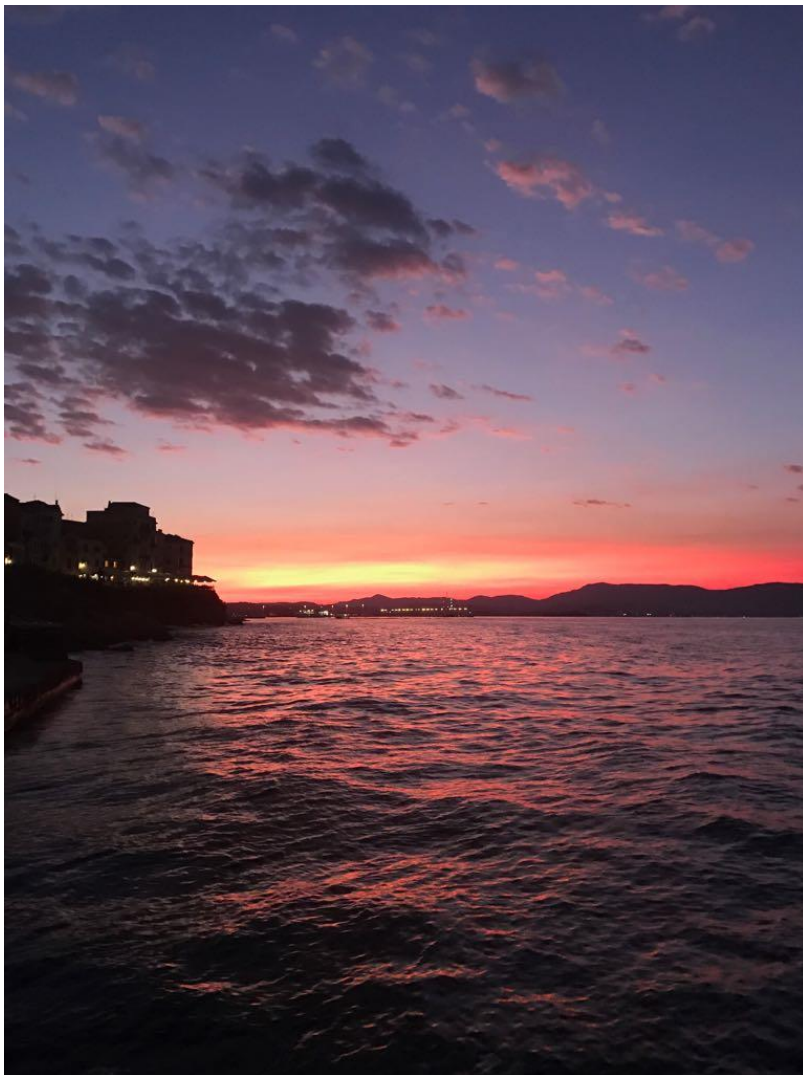


Long and far they glided, silent through the waters into shallows where water from the brown mountains stained the froth of incoming tides, where birds twittered among the reeds and little fish jumped in the pools.

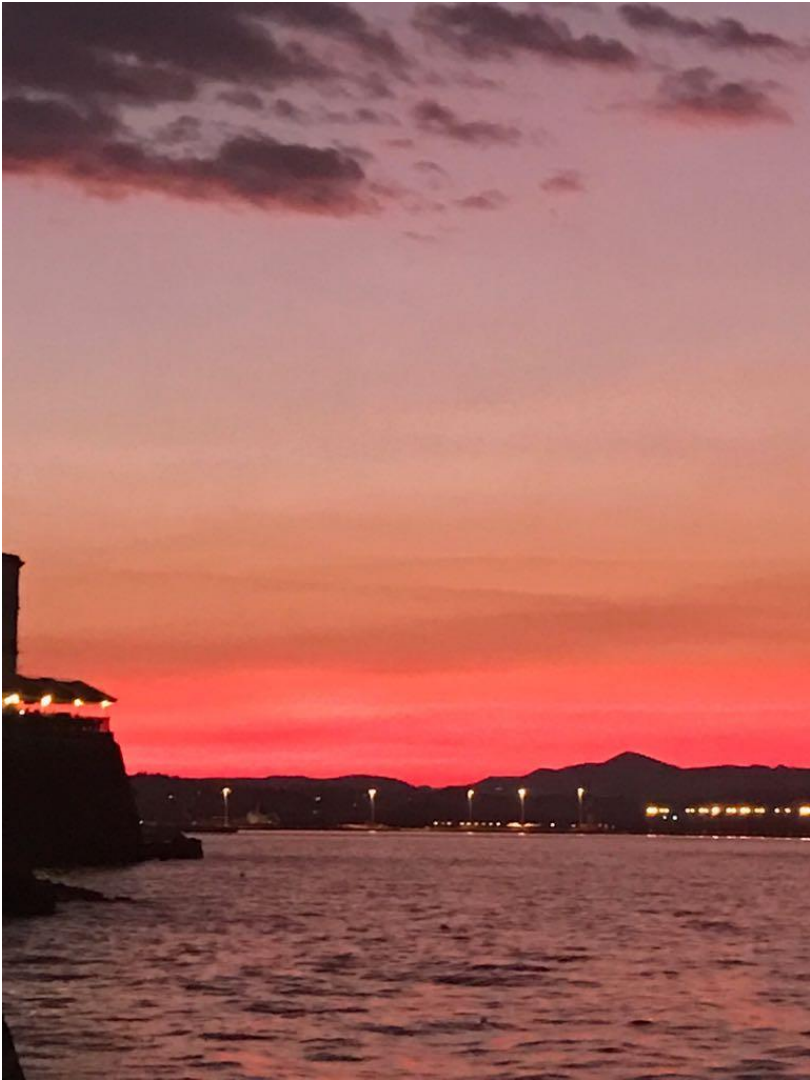




Parched by the sun, but finding the heat agreeable, they sailed on, she listening to his heart beating in her ear. Then Nausicaa launched the boat and as she drifted out she felt his breath in her hair and took in the sea's odour. She sang to a half-moon that swung among the stars and her sound filled the heavens with a rosy contentment.



Along the shores the little waves went lapping softly and the streams tinkled down the sands. She sailed in silence, indulgent of her illusion that this indeed was her wedding day. The night was generous with her imagination.



Again, she took up her singing, sweet as liquid gold. Her voice came over the water, the enchanting sound of a bride's voice, filling the air with a delicate resonance that could silence all children and wring the hearts of men.





