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OVID METAMORPHOSES

TRANSLATED BY
**STANLEY
LOMBARDO**
INTRODUCTION BY
W. R. JOHNSON

Invocation

My mind now turns to stories of bodies changed
 Into new forms. O Gods, inspire my beginnings
 (For you changed them too) and spin a poem that extends
 From the world's first origins down to my own time.

Book 1

- Invocation*
- Origin of the World*
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- Phaëthon and Clymene*

Origin of the World

Before there was land or sea or overarching sky,
 Nature's face was one throughout the universe,
 Chaos as they call it: a crude, unsorted mass,
 Nothing but an inert lump, the concentrated,
 Discordant seeds of disconnected entities.
 No Titan Sun as yet gave light to the world,
 No Phoebe touched up her crescent horns by night,
 Not yet did Earth hang nested in air, balanced
 By her own weight, and Amphitrite had not yet
 Stretched her arms around the world's long shores.
 Yes, there was land around, and sea and air,
 But land impossible to walk, unnavigable water,
 Lightless air; nothing held its shape,
 And each thing crowded the other out. In one body
 Cold wrestled with hot, wet with dry,
 Soft with hard, and weightless with heavy.

Some god, or superior nature, settled this conflict,
 Splitting earth from heaven, sea from earth,
 And the pure sky from the dense atmosphere.
 After he carved these out from the murky mass,
 In peaceful concord he bound each in its place.
 The fiery, weightless energy of the convex sky
 Shot to the zenith and made its home there.
 The air, next in levity, was next in location,
 Then the denser earth attracted the heavier elements
 And was pushed down by her own weight. The circling sea
 Settled down at her edges, confining the solid orb.

Then, the god who had sorted out this cosmic heap,
 Whoever it was, and divided it into parts,
 First rolled the earth, so it would not appear
 Asymmetrical, into the shape of a great sphere;
 And then he ordered the sea to flood and swell
 Beneath high winds until it lapped the planet's shores.
 He threw in springs and immense wetlands,
 Lakes and rivers, which he channeled in sloping banks
 So some are absorbed by the land itself, while others cascade 40
 Into the sea, where received at last into open water
 They beat no longer against banks but shores.
 He also ordered the prairies to stretch, the valleys to sink,
 The woods to take leaf, rocky mountains to rise.
 And as two zones belt the sky on the right,
 Two on the left, and a fifth burns in the middle,
 This providential god marked the globe beneath
 With these same five zones, so that of the earth's regions
 The middle is too hot for habitation, 50
 Deep snow covers two, but the two wedged between
 Have a climate that tempers heat with cold.

Hanging above is the air, as much heavier
 Than fire as water is lighter than earth.
 The god ordained mist and clouds to form there,
 And thunder that would make human minds tremble,
 And winds too, gusting with thunder and lightning.
 The World's Fabricator did not allow the winds
 Free rein in the air. He barely controls them now,
 When each must blow in his own tract of heaven, 60
 Else they would shred the world with their fraternal strife.
 Eurus receded to the East and the Nabataean realms,
 To Persia and its ridges bathed in morning light.
 Evening, and the shores warmed by the setting sun,
 Are nearest to Zephyrus. Bristling Boreas
 Invaded Scythia and the Arctic stars. The land
 Due south drips with Auster's constant mist and rain.
 Above all these he put the liquid, weightless
 Aether, which has nothing of earthly dregs.

The deity had just finished zoning off everything
 When the stars, which had long been smothered
 In dark vapor, peeked out and glowed all over the sky.
 And so that no region would be without living things
 Of its own, constellations and the forms of gods
 Possessed heaven's floor; the sea allowed itself
 To swarm with glistening fish, the land became
 A wild kingdom, and the air teemed with wings.

Still missing was a creature finer than these,
 With a greater mind, one who could rule the rest:
 Man was born, whether fashioned from immortal seed
 By the Master Artisan who made this better world, 80
 Or whether Earth, newly parted from Aether above
 And still bearing some seeds of her cousin Sky,
 And mixed with rainwater by Titan Prometheus
 And molded into the image of the omnipotent gods.
 And while other animals look on all fours at the ground
 He gave to humans an upturned face, and told them to lift
 Their eyes to the stars. And so Earth, just now barren,
 A wilderness without form, was changed and made over,
 Dressing herself in the unfamiliar figures of men.

The Four Ages

Golden was the first age, a generation
 That cultivated trust and righteousness
 All on its own, without any laws, without fear
 Or punishment. There were no threatening rules
 Stamped on bronze tablets, no crowds of plaintiffs
 Cowering before judges: no one needed protection.
 Not a pine was cut from its native mountain
 To be launched on a maritime tour of the world;
 Mortal men knew no shores but their own.
 Steep trenches around cities were still in the future;
 There were no bronze bugles, no curved, blaring horns, 100
 No helmets or swords. Without a military
 A carefree people enjoyed a life of soft ease.

The inviolate earth, untouched by hoes, still
 Unwounded by plows, bore fruit all on its own,
 And content with food unforced by labor
 Men gathered arbut, mountain strawberries,
 Wild cherries, blackberries clinging to brambles,
 And acorns that fell from Jove's spreading oaks.
 Spring was eternal, and mild westerly breezes
 Soughed among flowers sown from no seed.
 Even uncultivated the soil soon bore crops
 And fields unfollowed grew white with deep grain.
 Rivers flowed with milk, streams ran with nectar,
 And honey dripped tawny from the green holm oak.

After Saturn was consigned to Tartarus' gloom
 The world was under Jove, and the Silver race came in,
 Cheaper than gold but more precious than bronze.
 Jupiter curtailed the old season of spring
 And by adding cold and heat and autumn's changes
 To a brief spring, made the year turn through its four seasons. 120
 For the first time the air, parched and feverish,
 Began to burn, and icicles now hung frozen in wind.
 People now took shelter; their houses were caves,
 Dense thickets, and branches bound together with bark.
 Cereal seeds now lay buried, sown in long furrows,
 And for the first time oxen groaned under the yoke.

The next and third generation was Bronze,
 Harsher in its genius and more ready to arms,
 Not wicked however.

The fourth and last is Iron.
 Every iniquity burst out in this inferior age.
 Shame and Veracity and Faith took flight,
 And in their place came Duplicity and Fraud,
 Treachery and Force, and unholy Greed.
 They spread sails to the winds still a mystery
 To sailors, and keels that once stood high in the mountains
 Now surged and bucked in unfamiliar waves.
 The cautious surveyor now marks off the fields

Once held in common like the sunlight and air.
 And the rich earth is not only required to produce
 Crops and food: now her bowels are tunneled, 140
 And the ore she'd sequestered in Stygian darkness
 Is now dug up as wealth that incites men to crime.
 Iron with its injuries and more injurious gold
 Now came forth, and War, equipped with both of these metals,
 Brandishes clashing weapons in bloodstained hands.
 Plunder sustains life; guest is not safe from host,
 Or a father safe from his daughter's husband;
 Gratitude is rare even among brothers. Husbands
 Can't wait for their wives to die, wives reciprocate,
 Frightful stepmothers brew their aconite, and sons 150
 Inquire prematurely into their father's age.
 Piety lies beaten, and when the other gods are gone,
 Virgin Astraea abandons the bloodstained earth.

The Giants

And, so the lofty sky would not be safer than earth,
 They say the Giants went after the kingdom of heaven,
 Piling up mountains all the way to the stars.
 Then the Father Almighty shattered Olympus
 With a well-aimed thunderbolt and blasted away Pelion
 From Ossa beneath. When the Giants' dread corpses
 Lay crushed beneath their own bulk, they say Mother Earth, 160
 Drenched with her sons' blood, reanimated
 Their steaming gore, and to preserve the memory
 Of her former brood, gave it a human form.
 But this incarnation also was contemptuous
 Of the gods, with a deep instinct for slaughter,
 And violent. You could tell they were sons of blood.

The Council of the Gods

Jupiter, seeing this from his high throne, groaned.
 He recalled, too, the sordid dinner parties of Lycaon,
 Too recent for the story to be well-known, and conceived

In his heart a mighty wrath worthy of the soul of Jove.
He called a council, and none of the gods were late. 170

On a clear night you can see a road in the sky
Called the Milky Way, renowned for its white glow.
This is the road the gods take to the royal palace
Of the great Thunderer. To the right and the left
The halls of the divine nobility, doors flung open,
Are thronged with guests. The plebeian gods
Live in a different neighborhood, but the great
All have their homes along this avenue. This quarter,
If I may say so, is high heaven's Palatine. 180

So, when the gods had been seated in a marble chamber,
The God himself, enthroned high above the rest, leaning
On his ivory scepter, shook three times, four times,
The dread locks whereby he moves land, sea, and stars.
And opening his indignant lips, he spoke in this way:

"I was not more concerned than I am now
For the world when the serpentine Giants threatened
To get their hundred hands on the captured sky.
Although the enemy was brutal, that war at least
Stemmed from a united body and single source. 190
But now, wherever old Nereus' ocean roars,
The human race must be destroyed. By the river
That glides through the underworld grove of Styx,
I swear that I have already tried everything else,
But gangrenous flesh must be cut away with a knife
Before it infects the rest. I have demigods to protect
And rustic deities—nymphs, fauns, satyrs,
And sylvan spirits on the mountainsides.
Although we do not deem them worthy of heaven,
We should at least let them live in their allotted lands. 200
Do you think they will be safe there, I ask you,
When even against me, who rule you gods,
Snares are laid by the infamous Lycaon?"

The gods all trembled and zealously demanded
The traitor's head. So it was when a disloyal few
Were mad to blot out Rome with Caesar's blood,
And the human race was stunned with fear of ruin
And the whole world shuddered. The loyalty
Of your subjects, Augustus, pleases you no less
Than Jove was pleased. With word and gesture
He stilled the crowd, and when the clamor
Had been suppressed by his royal gravitas,
Jove once more broke the silence, saying:

"He has paid the penalty—of that you can be sure—
But listen to what he did, and hear his punishment.

Lycaon

The infamy of the age had reached my ears,
And hoping to discover the report was false, I slipped down
From Olympus, a god disguised as a human,
And crisscrossed the land. There is not time to do justice
To the catalog of iniquity I found everywhere. 220
The report fell short of the truth. I had traversed
Mount Maenala, its thickets bristling with animal lairs,
Crossed Cyllene, and Lycaeus' cold pine forests,
And was coming up to the Arcadian tyrant's
Inhospitable hall as the late evening shadows
Ushered in the night. I gave a sign that a god had come,
And the common people began to pray. Lycaon
Started by mocking their pieties, and then said,
'I'll find out if this is a mortal or a god. A simple test
Will establish the truth beyond any doubt.'
The test of truth he had in mind was to murder me
While I was fast asleep. And not content with that,
He slit the throat of a Molossian hostage,
Boiled some of his half-dead flesh and roasted the rest.
As soon as he set this delicate dish before me,
My avenging lightning brought down the house
On its master and his all-too-deserving household. 230

He fled in terror, and when he reached the silent fields
 He let loose a howl. He tried to speak but could not.
 His mouth foamed, and he turned his usual bloodlust
 240 Against a flock of sheep, still relishing slaughter.
 His clothes turned into a shaggy pelt, his arms into legs.
 He became a wolf, but still retains some traces
 Of his former looks. There is the same grey hair,
 The same savage face; the same eyes gleam,
 And the same overall sense of bestiality.
 Only one house has fallen, yet more than one
 Has deserved perdition. Erinys, the wild Fury,
 Reigns supreme to the ends of the earth. You would think
 250 They were sworn in blood to a life of crime! Let them all
 Pay quickly the price they deserve—this is my edict.”

Some of the gods voiced their approval and even
 Goaded him on, while others playacted their silent consent,
 But they all winced on the inside at the impending loss
 Of the human race and wondered out loud
 What the world would be without men. Who would bring
 Incense to their altars? Was Jupiter planning
 To deliver the world to the depredations of beasts?
 The master of the universe told them to let him
 260 Worry about all that, and he promised them a new race,
 Different from the first, from a wondrous origin.

The Flood

He was poised to hurl volleys of thunderbolts
 All over the world, but he backed off in sudden fear
 That the conflagration might kindle the sacred aether
 And set the long axis on fire from pole to pole.
 He recalled, too, that a time was fated to come
 When land and sea and heaven's majestic roof
 Would catch fire, and the foundations of the world
 Would go up in flames. So he laid aside
 270 The weapons forged by Cyclopean hands

And chose instead a different punishment:
 To overwhelm humanity with an endless deluge
 Pouring down from every square inch of sky.
 So he shut up the North Wind in Aeolus' cave
 Along with every breeze that disperses clouds.
 But he cut loose the South Wind, which scudded out
 On dripping wings, scowling in pitch-black mist,
 His beard sodden with rain, his white hair
 Streaming water, clouds nesting on his forehead,
 280 And dew glistening on all his feathers and robes.
 The flat of his hand presses low-hanging clouds
 And rain crashes down from the sky. Then Iris,
 Juno's rainbow messenger, draws up more water
 To feed the lowering clouds. Crops farmers prayed for
 Are beaten flat; years of hard work are all blotted out.

Jove's wrath was not content with his own sky's water,
 So his sea-blue brother rolled out auxiliary waves.
 The Rivers jumped to formation in their tyrant's palace
 And he gave his command:

“My brief to you is to pour forth
 290 Everything you have. This is a crisis. Open wide
 Your doors and dikes and give your streams free rein!”

The Rivers returned, uncurbed their springs,
 And tumbled unbridled down to the sea.

Neptune himself struck the Earth with his trident;
 She trembled, and split mouths wide open for geysers,
 And the Rivers spread out over the open plains,
 Sweeping away orchards and crops, cattle and men,
 Houses and shrines and the shrines' sacred objects.
 If any houses were able to resist this disaster
 And still stood, the waves soon covered their roofs,
 And towers were submerged beneath the flood.
 And now sea and land could not be distinguished.
 300 All was sea, but it was a sea without shores.

Here's a man on a hilltop, and one in his curved skiff,
 Rowing where just yesterday he plowed. Another one
 Sails over acres of wheat or the roof of his farmhouse
 Deep underwater. Here's someone catching a fish
 In the top of an elm. Sometimes an anchor
 Sticks in a green meadow, or keels brush the tops
 Of vineyards beneath. Where slender goats once browsed
 Seals now flop their misshapen bodies. Nereids gape
 At houses, cities, and groves undersea,
 And dolphins cruise through forest canopies,
 Grazing the oak trees with their flippers and tails.
 Wolves swim with sheep, tawny lions and tigers
 Tread the same currents. The boar's lightning tusks
 And the stag's speed are useless as the torrent
 Sweeps them away. With no land in sight, no place to perch
 The exhausted bird drops into the sea,
 Whose unbridled license has buried the hills
 And now pounds mountaintops with unfamiliar surf.
 Most creatures drown. Those spared by the water
 Finally succumb to slow starvation.

Deucalion and Pyrrha

Phocis is a land that separates Boeotia
 From Oetaea, a fertile land while it was still land,
 But now it was part of the sea, a great plain
 Of flood water. There is a steep mountain there
 With twin peaks stretching up through the clouds
 To the high stars. Its name is Parnassus.
 When Deucalion and his wife landed here
 In their little skiff (water covered everything else)
 They first paid a visit to the Corycian nymphs,
 The mountain gods, and Themis, who was the oracle then.
 There was no man better or more just than he,
 And no woman revered the gods more than she.
 When Jupiter saw the whole world reduced
 To a stagnant pond, and from so many thousands
 Only one man left, from so many thousands

Only one woman, each innocent, each reverent,
 He parted the clouds, and when the North Wind
 Had swept them away, he once again showed
 The earth to the sky, and the heavens to the earth.
 The sea's roiling anger subsided, as Neptune
 Lay down his trident and soothed the waves. He hailed
 Cerulean Triton rising over the crests,
 His shoulders encrusted with purple shellfish,
 And told him to blow his winding horn
 To signal the floods and streams to withdraw.
 Old Triton lifted the hollow, spiraling shell
 Whose sound fills the shores on both sides of the world
 When he gets his lungs into it out in mid-ocean.
 When this horn touched the sea god's lips, streaming
 With brine from his dripping beard, and sounded the retreat,
 It was heard by all the waters of land and sea,
 And all the waters that heard were held in check.
 Now the sea had a shore, rivers flowed in channels,
 The floods subsided, and hills emerged into view.
 The land rose up; locales took shape as waters shrank,
 And at long last the trees bared their leafy tops,
 Foliage still spattered with mud left by the flood.

The world was restored. But when Deucalion saw
 It was an empty world, steeped in desolate silence,
 Tears welled up in his eyes as he said to Pyrrha,

“My wife and sister, the last woman alive,
 Our common race, our family, our marriage bed
 And now our perils themselves have united us.
 In all the lands from sunrise to sunset
 We two are the whole population; the sea holds the rest.
 And our lives are far from guaranteed. These clouds
 Still strike terror in my heart. Poor soul,
 What would you feel like now if the Fates
 Had taken me and left you behind? How could you bear
 Your fear alone? Who would comfort your grief?
 You can be sure that if the sea already held you,

I would follow you, my wife, beneath the sea.
 Oh, if only I could restore the people of the world
 By my father's arts, breathe life into molded clay!
 Now the human race rests on the two of us.
 We are, by the gods' will, the last of our kind."

He spoke and wept. Their best recourse was to implore
 The divine, to beg for help through sacred prophecy.
 So they went side by side to the stream of Cephisus,
 Which, though not yet clear, flowed in its old banks.
 They scooped up some water, sprinkled their heads and clothes,
 And made their familiar way to the sacred shrine
 Of the goddess. The gables were stained with slime and mold,
 And the altars stood abandoned without any fires.
 When they reached the temple steps, husband and wife
 Prostrated themselves, kissed the cold stone trembling,
 And said, "If divine hearts can be softened by prayers
 Of the just, if the wrath of the gods can be deflected,
 Tell us, O Themis, how our race can be restored,
 And bring aid, O most mild one, to a world overwhelmed."

The goddess, moved, gave this oracular response:

"Leave this temple. Veil your heads, loosen your robes,
 And throw behind your back your great mother's bones."

They stood there, dumbfounded. It was Pyrrha
 Who finally broke the silence, refusing to obey
 The commands of the goddess. She prays for pardon
 With trembling lips, but trembles all over
 At the thought of offending her mother's shades
 By tossing her bones. Stalling for time,
 The pair revisit the oracle's words, turning them
 Over and over in their minds, searching out
 Their dark secrets. At last Prometheus' son
 Comforts the daughter of Epimetheus
 With these soothing words:

"Either I'm mistaken

Or—since oracles are holy and never counsel evil—
 Our great mother is Earth, and stones in her soil
 Are the bones we are told to throw behind our backs."

Pyrrha was moved by her husband's surmise,

But the pair still were not sure that they trusted

The divine admonition. On the other hand,

What harm was there in trying? Down they go,

Veiling their heads, untying their robes, and throwing stones

Behind them just as the goddess had ordered.

And the stones began (who would believe it

Without the testimony of antiquity?)

To lose their hardness, slowly softening

And assuming shapes. When they had grown and taken on

A milder nature, a certain resemblance

To human form began to be discernible,

Not well defined, but like roughed-out statues.

The parts that were damp with earthy moisture

Became bodily flesh; the rigid parts became bones;

And the veins remained without being renamed.

In no time at all, by divine power, the stones

Thrown by the man's hand took the form of men

And from the woman's scattered stones women were born.

And so we are a tough breed, used to hard labor,

And we are living proof of our origin.

Earth herself spontaneously generated

Various other species of animals.

The sun warmed the moisture left from the flood,

Slime in the swamps swelled with the heat,

And seeds of life, nourished in that rich soil

As in a mother's womb, slowly gestated and took on

Distinctive forms. It was just as when the Nile,

With its seven mouths, withdraws from the flooded fields

Into its old channel, and then the Dog Star bakes

The plains of soft muck, and farmers turning over the clods

Find many animate things, some just on the verge

Of new life, some unfinished and just budding limbs,

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And sometimes they see in the very same body
 A part living and breathing, and a part still raw earth.
 For when heat and moisture combine, they conceive,
 And all things are born from their blended union.
 And though fire fights water, moist vapor is fecund,
 And this discordant concord is pregnant with life.
 So when Mother Earth's diluvian mud
 Again grew warm under the rays of the sun,
 She brought forth innumerable species, restoring some
 Of the ancient forms, and creating some new and strange.

Python

She would have rather not, but Earth begot you then,
 O Python, greatest of serpents and never before seen,
 And a terror to the new people, sprawling over
 Half a mountainside. The god of the bent bow
 Destroyed him with weapons never used before
 Except against does and wild goats on the run,
 Nearly emptying his quiver of arrows,
 And venom oozed from the monster's black wounds.
 And so Time would not tarnish the fame of this deed
 He founded sacred games for the crowds, called Pythian
 From the name of the serpent he had overcome.
 Here every youth who won with his fists or his feet,
 Or his chariot, received a garland of oak leaves.
 There was no laurel yet, and Apollo wreathed
 His brow and the gorgeous locks of his hair
 With a garland from whatever species of tree.

Apollo and Daphne

Apollo's first love was Daphne, Peneus' daughter,
 Not by blind chance but because Cupid was angry.
 Flush with his victory over Python, the Delian god
 Saw him stringing and flexing his bow, and said:

“What do you think you're doing, you little imp,
 With a man's weapons? That archery set

Belongs on my shoulders. I can take dead aim
 Against wild beasts, I can wound my enemies,
 And just now I laid low in a shower of arrows
 Swollen Python and left his noxious belly
 Spread out over acres. You should be satisfied
 With using your torch to inflame people with love
 And stop laying claim to glory that is mine.”

The son of Venus replied:

“Phoebus, your arrows
 May hit everything else, but mine will hit you.
 And as much as animals are inferior to gods,
 So is my glory superior to yours.”

He spoke

And, beating his wings with a vengeance, landed
 On the shady peak of Parnassus. He stood there,
 And drew from his quiver two quite different arrows,
 One that dispels love and one that impels it.
 The latter is golden with a sharp glistening point,
 The former blunt with a shaft made of lead.
 The god struck the nymph with arrow number two
 And feathered the first deep into Apollo's marrow.

One now loved, the other fled love's very name,
 Delighting in the deep woods, wearing the skins
 Of animals she caught, modeling herself
 On the virgin Diana, her tussled hair tied back.
 She had many suitors but could not endure men,
 So she turned them away, and roamed the pathless woods
 Without a thought of Hymen, or Amor, or marriage.
 Her father often said, “You owe me a son-in-law, girl.”
 Often observed, “You owe me grandchildren, my daughter.”
 But she hated the wedding torch like sin itself
 And her beautiful face would blush with shame
 As she hung from his neck with coaxing arms, saying,

“O Papa, please, won't you let me enjoy
 My virginity forever? Diana's father let her.”

Of course he agreed; but your very loveliness, Daphne,
Prevents your wish, your beauty opposes your prayer.

510

Apollo loves her at sight and desires to wed her.
What he desires he hopes for, but here his oracular
Powers desert him. As light stubble blazes
In a harvested field, or as a hedge catches fire
From embers a traveler has let get too close
Or has forgotten at daybreak, so too the god
Went up in flames, and all his heart burned
And fed his impossible passion with hope.
He sees the hair that flows all across her neck
And wonders, “What if it were combed?” Sees her eyes
Flash like stars; sees her mouth, which merely to see
Is hardly enough. He praises her fingers, her hands
Her arms, which for the most part are bare,
And what is hidden he imagines is better.

520

Her flight is faster than if she were wind,
And she does not pause to hear him calling her back:

“Nymph of Peneus, I beg you, stop! I am not
Pursuing you as an enemy. Please, nymph, stop!
This is how a lamb runs away from a wolf,
A deer from a lion, a trembling dove from an eagle,
Each from her enemy, but Love makes me pursue you.
Ah, I am afraid you will fall, afraid that brambles
Will scratch your shins and that I, oh so wretched,
Will be the cause of your pain. This is rough terrain
You are running through. Run a little slower,
Please, and I’ll slow down too. Or stop and ask
Who your lover is—no hillbilly or shepherd—
I don’t mind the herds here, like some shaggy oaf.
You do not know, my rash one, you just don’t know
Who you are running from, and that’s why you run.
Delphi is mine; I am lord of Claros and Tenedos
And the realm of Patara. Jove is my father.
What shall be, what is now, and what has been

540

Are all revealed by me. It is through me that songs
Are played in tune on the lyre. My arrows are sure,
But one arrow more sure has wounded my heart
That once was carefree. I invented medicine,
I am called the Healer throughout the world,
The potency of herbs is my domain, but oh,
Love cannot be cured by herbs, and the arts
That benefit all are of no use to their lord.”

550

He would have said more, but the Peneid nymph
Was running scared and left his words unfinished.
She was still a lovely sight. The wind bared her body
And as she cut through the air, her clothes fluttering
As her hair streamed out behind her in the breeze,
Her beauty augmented by flight. But the young god
Could not waste any more time on sweet talk,
Not with the Love God himself urging him on,
And he picked up the pace. A Gallic hound
Snuffs out and starts a hare in a field,

560

The hound running for prey, the hare for her life,
And now the hunter thinks he has her, thinks
Any moment now, his muzzle grazing her heels,
While she, unsure whether she is finally caught,
Writhes out of his jaws with a sudden spurt.
So too the virgin and the deity ran,
His speed spurred by hope and hers by fear,
But the pursuer closed in, boosted by Cupid’s wings,
And he gave her no rest, staying right on her back,
His breath fanning the hair on the base of her neck.
She turned pale as her strength began to run out,
Beaten by the speed and the length of the race.
When she saw the waters of the Peneus, she cried,

570

“Help me, father! If your streams have divine power,
Destroy this too pleasing beauty of mine
By transforming me!”

She had just finished her prayer
When a heavy numbness invaded her body

And a sheathe of bark enclosed her soft breast.
 Her hair turned into fluttering leaves, her arms
 Into branches; her feet, once so swift,
 Became mired in roots, and her face was lost
 In the canopy. Only her beauty's sheen remained.

580

Apollo still loved her, and pressing his hand
 Against her trunk he felt her heart quivering
 Under the new bark. He embraced her limbs
 With his own arms, and he kissed the wood,
 But even the wood shrank from his kisses.
 The god said to her:

“Since you can't be my bride
 You will be my tree. My hair will be wreathed
 With you, Laurel, and you will crown my quiver and lyre.
 You will accompany the Roman generals
 When joyful voices ring out their triumphs
 And their long parades wind beneath the Capitol.
 You will ornament Augustus' doorposts,
 A faithful guardian standing watch over
 The oak leaves between them. And just as my head
 With its unshorn hair is forever young,
 You will always wear beautiful, undying leaves.”

Apollo was done. The laurel bowed her new branches
 And seemed to nod her leafy crown in assent.

590

600

Io

There is a gorge in Thessaly with steep wooded slopes
 That men call Tempe. The foam-flecked water
 Of the Peneus River tumbles though this valley
 From the foot of Mount Pindus, and its heavy descent
 Forms clouds that drive along billowing mist,
 Sprinkles the treetops with spray and, cascading down,
 Fills even the distant hills with its roar.
 Here is the house, the abode, the inner sanctum
 Of the great River. Seated here, in a cavern

610

Carved from boulders, he lays down the law
 To his streams, and the nymphs who live in his streams.
 The neighboring rivers convened here first,
 Unsure whether to console or congratulate
 Daphne's father. Spercheios came sporting poplars,
 Restless Enipeus, old Apidanos,
 Gentle Amphrysos, Aeos too, and soon all the streams,
 Whatever wandering courses their weary waters
 Take down to the sea. Only Inachus is absent.
 Hidden deep in a cave, his stream swelling with tears,
 He laments in his misery his lost daughter, Io,
 Not knowing if she lives or is lost among the shades.
 Finding her nowhere, he imagines her nowhere,
 And in his heart he fears even worse.

620

Jupiter

First laid eyes on her as she made her way
 From her father's stream, and he said to her:
 “Virgin worthy of Jove, clearly destined to make
 Some man or other happy in your bed,
 You should find some shade over there in the woods.”
 (Pointing) “while it is hot and the sun is high.
 If you are afraid to go alone where the wild things live,
 You can go with the safe protection of a god,
 And no ordinary god either. I am the one who holds
 The scepter of heaven and hurls the lightning bolts.
 Do not run from me!”

630

She was already running
 And had left Lerna's fields behind and the woods
 Of Lyrcea, when the god covered the wide earth
 In a blanket of mist and stole her chastity.

Juno, meanwhile, looked straight down at Argos
 And wondered why this sudden fog had made night
 Out of brilliant day. She knew there had not been
 Any mist from a river or from any damp ground.
 She looked around for her husband, suspecting

640

The intrigue of a spouse so often caught in the act.
 When she could not find him anywhere in the skies,
 She said, "Either I'm wrong or I'm being wronged."
 And she glided down from the top of heaven,
 Stood upon the earth and dissolved the clouds.
 But Jove had a presentiment of his wife's approach
 And had changed the daughter of Inachus
 Into a glossy heifer. She was still stunning,
 Even as a cow. Juno looked at her and couldn't help
 But admire her looks. Then she asked whose she was,
 Where from, of what stock, as if she didn't know.
 Her husband, to forestall further inquiries, maintained
 That she was born of the earth, but Juno countered
 By demanding her as a gift. What should he do?
 Cruel to surrender his love, but suspect not to.
 Shame persuaded, Love dissuaded, and Shame
 Would surely have yielded to Love, but to refuse
 So slight a gift as a cow to his sister and wife
 Might make the cow seem to be no cow at all.

So Juno received her bovine rival but was still
 Suspicious of her husband and more escapades
 Until she enlisted Argus, son of Arestor,
 To watch over the heifer. Argus' head was ringed
 With a hundred eyes that took turns sleeping
 Two at a time while the others stood watch,
 So whatever way he stood his eyes were on Io,
 Even when she was behind his back. In the daytime
 He let her graze, but when the sun went down
 He locked her up with a collar—the indignity!—
 Around her neck. Her diet was leaves from trees
 And bitter herbs, and instead of a bed the poor creature
 Lay on the ground, which was not always grassy.
 And she drank from muddy streams. When she would stretch
 Her suppliant arms to Argus, she had no arms to stretch,
 And when she tried to complain she only moomed.
 The sound startled her, and her own voice
 Became a new source of fear. She came to the banks

Of the Inachus, where she had often played,
 But when she saw those strange horns reflected
 In the water, she shied away from herself in terror.
 The Naiads did not know who she was; Inachus himself
 Did not know. But she followed her father,
 Followed her sisters, allowed herself to be petted,
 Offered herself to be admired. Old Inachus
 Held out to her some grass he had plucked. She licked
 His hand, but as she kissed her father's palms
 She could not hold back her tears. If only she could speak,
 She would ask for help, tell her name, tell her sad story.
 Words wouldn't come, but she managed to paw in the dust
 Letters that spelled out her transfiguration.

"What misery," exclaimed her father, Inachus,
 And draping himself on the lowing heifer's horns
 And snow-white neck, he lamented again.

"What misery! Are you really my daughter
 Whom I have searched for all over the earth?
 Unfound you were a lesser grief than regained.
 You are silent and do not respond to my words;
 You only heave deep sighs from your chest, and—
 All you can do—bellow and moo in reply!
 Not knowing any better, I was preparing
 Marriage rites for you, hoping for a son-in-law
 And grandchildren later. But now your husband
 Must come from the herd, from the herd a child.
 And I cannot even end my sorrows with death.
 It hurts to be a god, for death's door is shut,
 And my grief extends into eternity."

As he mourned in this way, star-studded Argus
 Pulled him away, and drove the daughter, torn
 From her father's side, into a distant pasture,
 Positioning himself on the top of a mountain
 From which he could keep watch in all directions.

But heaven's ruler could no longer endure
 Io's great suffering. He calls his son
 Whom the shining Pleiad bore and orders him
 To deliver Argus to death. It does not take long
 For Mercury to lace up his winged sandals,
 Grab his somniferous wand and put on his cap.
 His gear in order, the son of Jupiter
 Makes the jump from heaven to earth, where
 He takes off his cap and sets aside his wings,
 Keeping only his wand, which he used like a shepherd
 To drive a flock of goats (rustled en route)
 Through the back country, playing a pipe as he went.
 Juno's guard was captivated by the strange music,
 And called out,

“You there, whoever you are, you
 Might as well sit down here on this rock next to me,
 There's no richer grass for grazing anywhere,
 And you see there's shade here fit for a shepherd.”

So Atlas' grandson sat down and passed the day
 Talking about this and that and playing his reed pipe,
 Trying to overcome those bright, vigilant eyes.
 But Argus fought hard against the languors of sleep,
 And though he allowed some of his eyes to slumber,
 He kept some awake. And since the reed pipe, or syrinx,
 Was a new invention, he asked where it came from.

Pan and Syrinx

So the god began:

“In Arcadia's cold mountains
 There was among the wood nymphs of Nonacris
 An admired naiad. Her sister nymphs called her Syrinx.
 She had eluded the pursuit of more than one satyr
 And various other deities of the shadowy woods
 And wild countryside. She cultivated the virginity
 Of the Ortygian goddess, and in Diana's dress
 She could pass for Leto's daughter, except that her bow
 Was made of horn and Diana's was gold.

Even so she was often mistaken for the goddess.
 Once, she was returning from Mount Lycaeum
 When Pan saw her. Crowned with a circlet
 Of sharp pine needles he called out to her . . .”

Here Mercury stopped with much still to tell—
 How the nymph rejected Pan's advances
 And fled through the trackless woods until
 She came to the quiet, sandy stream of Ladon;
 And how, with the water in her path, she prayed
 To her aquatic sisters for transfiguration;
 How just when Pan thought he had Syrinx in his hands,
 Instead of the nymph's body he held marshy reeds,
 And how his breath sighing over one reed
 Made a thin, plaintive sound. The god was taken
 With the strange sweetness of the tone, and he said,
 “This communion with you I will always have, Syrinx.”
 And so graduated reeds joined together with wax
 Became the instrument that still bears the girl's name.

Mercury was poised to tell the whole story
 When he saw that all of the eyes had closed.
 He stopped speaking and deepened Argus' slumber
 By waving his wand over those languid orbs.
 And then he brought his sickled sword down
 On that nodding head where it joined the neck
 And sent it spattering down the steep rocks.
 Now you lie low, Argus, and all your lights are out,
 Those hundred eyes mastered by one dark night.

Juno took the eyes and set them in the feathers
 Of her own bird, filling the tail of the peacock
 With starlike jewels. But her anger flared,
 And the goddess lost no time in fulfilling it,
 Setting a terrifying Fury before the eyes and mind
 Of her Argive rival, and planting deep in her breast
 A blind, compulsive fear that drove her in flight
 Across the whole world. In the end it was you,

720

730

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O Nile, who brought her immense ordeal to a close.
 When she reached your waters she fell to her knees
 On the riverbank, and turning back her long neck
 She lifted her face, which was all she could lift,
 To the stars. With groans and tears and pathetic howling
 She seemed to reproach Jupiter, to beg him for an end
 To all her sorrows. And Jupiter threw his arms
 Around his wife's neck and begged her to end
 Her vendetta at last, saying, "Put aside your fear.
 In the future this girl will never cause you grief."
 And he called as witness the waters of Styx.

As the goddess calms down, Io regains
 Her previous form and becomes what she was.
 The bristles recede, the horns decrease, the great eyes
 Grow smaller, the jaws contract, arms and hands
 Return, and each solid hoof becomes five nails again.
 Only the heifer's milk-white color remains.
 Happy to have her two legs back, Io stands
 Erect now, and fearing her speech will come out as moos,
 She cautiously pronounces her neglected words.

Phaëthon and Clymene

Now she is worshipped as a goddess by throngs
 Of linen-robed devotees. In due time she bore a child,
 Epaphus, believed to be great Jupiter's son,
 Coreident of his mother's civic temples.
 He had a friend well-matched in age and spirit,
 Phaëthon, a child of the Sun, who once began boasting
 Of his solar parentage and would not back down
 When Inachus' grandson rejected his claim:
 "You're crazy to believe all that your mother says,
 And you're swellheaded about your imagined father."
 Phaëthon turned red. He repressed his anger out of shame
 But brought Epaphus' slander to his mother, Clymene:

"And to make it worse, mother, I, the free, the fierce,
 Said nothing. I am ashamed that such a reproach

Has gone unanswered. But if I really am born
 Of divine stock, give me some kind of proof,
 A claim to heaven."

With that he threw his arms
 Around his mother's neck and begged her by his own life,
 Her husband Merops' life, and his sister's marriages
 To give him some sign of his true parentage.

Clymene, moved perhaps by her son's entreaties,
 Or, more likely, by anger at the charge against her,
 Stretched her arms to the sky and, looking up at the sun,
 Said,

"By the glittering radiance that you see here,
 My son, and that hears and sees us, I swear
 That you were born of this light that rules the world
 And are a child of the Sun. If I am lying,
 May he never let me look upon him again,
 And may this be the last light that reaches my eyes!
 It would not take long for you to find your father's house.
 The country he rises from borders our own.
 If you have a mind to do so, go ask the Sun himself!"

Phaëthon beamed happily at his mother's words
 And, imagining the heavens in his mind,
 He left Ethiopia in a flash, crossed India
 Beneath its stars, and reached his father's Orient.

790

800

810

820

830

Nisus and Scylla

When the Morning Star had chased away the night
 And let the shining day peek through, the East Wind fell
 And moist clouds rolled in. The soft South Wind
 Offered easy sailing to Cephalus and Aeacus' troops
 And blew them into harbor sooner than they had hoped.
 Minos meanwhile was pillaging the coast of Megara
 And was flexing his muscles against the city itself,
 Where Nisus was king. This Nisus had a head
 Of distinguished grey hair, but one of the locks
 Was bright purple, and on this one lock of hair
 The security of his kingdom depended.

10

The horns of the moon had been retipped six times
 And the outcome of the war still hung in the balance,
 Victory hovering on uncertain wings.
 There was a royal tower topping the tuneful walls
 Where Apollo had set down the golden lyre
 Whose music still clung to the stones. The daughter
 Of King Nisus used to climb this tower
 And throw pebbles to clatter on the rocks below
 In the days when there was still peace. When the war came
 She would often look out at the hard fighting.

20

And now, as the war dragged on, she came to know
 The enemies' names, their armor, their horses,
 And their Cretan quivers. Above all she knew the face
 Of their commander, Europa's son, knew it
 Better than she should. If Minos' head were encased
 In a crested helmet, he was in her eyes
 Just lovely helmeted. If he carried a shining bronze shield,
 He looked good with a shield. When he threw a spear
 The girl raved about his strength and skill.
 When he pulled his bow into a great arc
 With an arrow on the string, she swore that Phoebus
 Was standing there with his arrows. But when
 He showed his face, bareheaded, wearing purple
 Astride his white horse, pulling on the embroidered reins

30

Book 8

- Nisus and Scylla*
- Minos and the Minotaur*
- Daedalus and Icarus*
- Daedalus and His Nephew*
- Meleager and the Calydonian Boar*
- Tales from Acheloius' Feast*
- Acheloius and the Echinades*
- Acheloius and Perimele*
- Philemon and Baucis*
- Erysichthon*

As he managed the foaming bit—then Nisus' daughter
 Could hardly be said to be in her right mind.
 She thought the javelin he touched was felicity itself,
 And the reins in his hands had gone to heaven.
 She would, if she could, run on her virginal feet
 Into the enemy's lines. She wanted to leap
 From the tower into the Cretan camp, fling open
 The city's bronze-bound gates and let the enemy in,
 And to do any other thing that Minos might want.
 And as she sat gazing at the Cretan's white tents,

40

"Should I rejoice," she said, "at this horrible war,
 Or should I grieve? I can't make up my mind.
 I grieve because Minos is the enemy
 Of the girl who loves him. But without this war
 I would never had known him. If I were his hostage
 He could give up the war. He would have me with him
 As a pledge of peace. If the mother who bore you,
 The most beautiful thing in all the world,
 Was anything like you, the god's passion for her
 Was justified. Oh I would be happy, happy, happy
 If I could fly through the air and stand in the camp
 Of the Cretan king, confess my own passion,
 And ask him what dowry he would like for me—
 Anything except my fatherland's citadel.

60

Night, that great nurse of our worries, fell as she spoke,
 And as the darkness came on her boldness grew.
 The first rest had come, when sleep enfolds the heart
 Weary with the cares of day, when Nisus' daughter
 Silently entered her father's bedroom
 And (ah!) despoiled him of the fatal strand of hair.
 With this nefarious prize in her possession
 She went through the enemy camp—so sure she was
 Of being welcomed there for what she had done—
 And straight to Minos, whom she startled, and said,

100

That awaits my city, why should his war
 Unbar my city's gates, and not my love? Better
 For him to conquer without prolonged massacre
 And the cost of his own blood. And that way

70

I wouldn't have to fear that someone might
 Unwittingly wound you, Minos. No one is so hard
 That he would knowingly throw a spear at you."

She liked her plan. She would give herself to him
 With her country as a dowry, and so end the war.
 But to decide is not enough.

"The entry is guarded,
 And my father holds the keys to the gates.
 He's the only one I fear, and the only one
 Who blocks my heart's desire. Would that the gods
 Make me fatherless! But we are all our own gods,
 And Fortune resists a cowardly prayer.

80

Any other girl burning with passion this great
 Would have long since merrily destroyed
 Whatever stood in the way of her love.
 And why should any girl be braver than I?
 I would dare to go through fire and sword,
 But there is no need here for any fire or sword.
 All I need is one strand of my father's hair.
 That is more precious to me than gold.
 That purple strand of hair will make me blessed
 And will give me all that my heart desires."

90

"Love made me do this. I, Scylla, daughter of Nisus,
 Deliver to you the gods of my country and my house.

I ask for no reward but you. As a pledge of my love
Take this purple strand of hair, and know that I give you
Not only a strand of hair but my father's life."

And she held out her gift in her sinful right hand.
Minos recoiled from her offering, horrified
At the sight of such an unprecedented act,
And answered her,

110

"May the gods banish you,
The infamy of our age, from their world,
And may neither land nor sea receive you.
You can be sure I will never allow such a monster
To set foot on Crete, which is both my world
And the cradle of Jove in his infancy."

Thus Minos, and when this most just lawgiver
Had imposed terms upon the conquered Athenians
He ordered his bronze-bound ships to cast off
Under full rowing power. When Scylla saw
That the ships had been launched, and that the king
Was not forthcoming with the reward for her sin
Despite her full complement of prayers, she shifted
Into a mode of extreme rage. Stretching out her arms,
Hair spreading out into fiery points, she screamed,

120

"Where are you going, abandoning the one
Who handed you your success, putting you before
My fatherland, before my father himself?
Where are you going, you inhuman man
Whose victory is my sin but to my credit too?
Does neither my gift nor my love for you
Move you, nor all of the hopes I placed in you
And in you alone? Where will I go now, deserted?
Back to my country? It has been overthrown.
But even if it weren't it is closed to me
Because of my treachery. Back to my father?
Whom I betrayed to you? My countrymen
All hate me, as well they should, and I am feared

130

By the neighboring cities for what I have done.
I've had myself banished from the rest of the world
So that Crete might be open to me. Close that
And leave me here, show me no gratitude,

140

And Europa could never have been your mother,
But the quicksands of Syrtis, an Armenian tigress,
The whirlpool of Charybdis! You're no son of Jove,
The semblance of a bull didn't beguile your mother—
That story of your birth is a lie—no, it was
A real bull, a savage beast who loved no heifer,
Who fathered you! Punish me, O Nisus, my father!
Rejoice in my suffering, city that I betrayed!

150

I deserve your hatred, and I deserve to die,
But at the hands of those whom I have injured
In my impiety. Why should I let you,
Who have triumphed through my sins, be the one
Who punishes my sins? You should see this act

That was a crime against my father and country
As a service to you. But you have your true mate
In the adulteress whose unnatural passion
Was satisfied by deceiving a savage bull
With a wooden contrivance, and who then bore
A hybrid offspring in her womb. Do my words
Reach your ears, or do the winds that fill your sails
Blow them away into the void, you ingrate?

160

No wonder Pasiphaë preferred the bull
To a monster like you! O God, he's ordering
Full speed ahead, the oars are smacking the waves,
And I and my land are falling behind him!
But it won't do you any good, forgetting
Everything I've done for you. I'll follow you
Against your will, clinging to your ship's stern
And dragged through the long sea."

170

With these words
She dove into the sea, swam up to the ship
With strength born of passion, and clung to the stern
Of the Cretan vessel, despised and unwelcome.

When her father—who had just been turned
 Into an osprey with golden wings and was hovering
 In the air—saw her clinging there, he swooped down
 To attack her with his hooked beak. Terrified,
 She let go of the stern, and as she fell
 The light air seemed to hold her up and keep her
 From touching the water, as if she were a feather.
 Changed into a feathered bird, she is called Ciris,
 The “Shearer,” from the shorn lock of hair.

180

Minos and the Minotaur

Minos paid his vows to Jove, a hundred bulls,
 As soon as he set foot on the beach in Crete
 And adorned his palace with the spoils of war.
 But now the family disgrace had grown up
 And its mother’s sordid adultery was revealed
 In the strange hybrid monster. Minos intended
 To remove this shame from his chambers and enclose it
 In a dark, winding labyrinth. Daedalus,
 A renowned master architect, did the work,
 Confounding the usual lines of sight
 With a maze of conflicting passageways.
 Just as the Maeander plays in Phrygian fields,
 Flowing back and forth and winding around
 In its ambiguous course so that sometimes it sees
 Its own waters flowing toward it, and flows itself
 Now back toward its source, now toward the sea—
 So Daedalus made all those passageways wander,
 And he himself had a hard time finding his way
 Back to the entrance of the deceptive building.

200

After Minos had shut up the Minotaur there
 He fed him twice on Athenian blood,
 Once every nine years. But the third tribute
 Of Athenian youths was the creature’s undoing.
 And when Theseus, with Ariadne’s help,
 Found his way back to the difficult entrance—

Which no previous hero had ever done—
 By winding up the thread, he took Minos’ daughter
 And sailed for Dia, and then abandoned her
 On that island’s shore. Marooned and reciting
 A litany of complaints, she received the aid
 And love of Bacchus, and so that she might shine
 Among the eternal stars, he took the tiara
 That circled her brow and sent it off to the sky.
 It flew through the thin air, and as it flew
 Its gemstones were changed into gleaming fires
 That found their place, still in the shape of a Crown,
 Between Ophiouchus’ and Hercules’ stars.

220

Daedalus and Icarus

Daedalus, meanwhile, hating his long exile
 In Crete, and longing for the place of his birth,
 Was locked in by the sea.
 “He may block
 Land and sea,” he said, “but the sky is open;
 We will go that way. Minos may own everything,
 But he does not own the air.”
 And turning his mind
 Toward unknown arts, he transformed nature.
 Spreading out feathers, he arranged them in order
 From shortest to longest, as if climbing a slope,
 The way reeds once rose into a panpipe’s shape.
 Then he bound the midline of the quills with thread
 And the ends with wax, and bent the formation
 Into a slight curve, imitating a real bird’s wing.
 His son Icarus stood at his side, and, unaware
 That he was touching his peril, the beaming boy
 Would try to catch feathers blown by the breeze,
 Or would knead the yellow wax with his thumb
 And as he played generally get in the way
 Of his genius father at work. When he had put
 The finishing touches on his craft, the artisan

230

240

Suspended himself between two identical wings,
And his body hovered in the moving air.

Then he equipped his son, saying,

“Stay in the middle,

Icarus. I warn you, if you go lower

The water will weigh down the feathers; higher,

The sun’s heat will scorch them. Fly in between,

And don’t gawk at Boötes, the Dipper,

Or the sword of Orion! Pick out your path

By following me.”

He gave him flying instructions

While fitting the unfamiliar wings to his shoulders,

And what with the work and the admonitions

His old cheeks grew moist, and his father’s hands trembled.

He kissed his dear son, a kiss never to be repeated,

And rising on wings he flies ahead in fear

For his companion—like a bird who leads

Its tender young into the air from its aerial nest—

Urging him to follow, teaching him ruinous arts,

And beating his own wings as he looks back at his son.

A fisherman with a trembling rod sees them—

Or a shepherd leaning on his staff, or a plowman—

They gape at these beings negotiating the air

And take them for gods. Juno’s isle Samos

Is now on the left (Delos and Paros are long gone)

And on the right are Lebinthos and honeyed Calymne,

When the boy begins to enjoy this daring flight

And veers off from his leader. He is drawn to the sky

And goes higher. Proximity to the blazing sun

Softens the scented wax that bound the feathers,

And the wax melts. He beats his naked arms

But lacking plumage cannot purchase air,

And his mouth was shouting his father’s name

When the blue water, which takes its name from his,

Closed over the boy. His bereft father,

A father no more, cried “Icarus, where are you,

Icarus, where should I look for you?” and kept calling,

“Icarus.” Then he saw the feathers in the waves.

He swore off his arts and buried the body,
And the land is known by the name on the tomb.

Daedalus and His Nephew

While Daedalus was burying his poor son,

A chattering partridge peeked out from a muddy ditch,

Flapped its wings, and burst into joyful song.

The bird was one of a kind, never seen before,

And only lately made a bird, a lasting reproach

To Daedalus, whose sister, ignorant of the fates,

Had sent her son to him to be an apprentice.

The boy was twelve years old and had a clever mind.

Using the backbone of a fish as a model,

He notched a row of teeth into a strip of iron

And so invented the saw. He was also the first

To bind two arms of iron together at a joint,

So that by fixing one arm in place and keeping

The span the same, the other arm could draw a circle.

Daedalus was envious and pushed the boy

From Minerva’s sacred citadel, and then lied

That he had fallen. But Pallas, who is partial

To the quick-witted, caught him and made him

Into a bird, giving him feathers in midair.

The vigor of his mind passed into his wings and legs,

But he kept the name he had before being transfigured.

This bird does not fly high, or build her nest

In trees or on high peaks. She flutters on the ground

And lays her eggs in hedgerows. Remembering

That old fall, she remains afraid of high places.

Meleager and the Calydonian Boar

Now Sicily received the weary Daedalus,

Where Cocalus defended the suppliant

And was thought of as kind. And now, too, Athens

Stopped paying the grim tribute, thanks to Theseus.

They wreathe the temple, call on Minerva,

The warrior goddess, and upon Jupiter,
 And worship all gods with blood sacrifices,
 Bestowing gifts upon them and burning incense.
 Theseus' fame spread through all the Greek cities,
 And all Achaea sought his help in times of peril.
 Calydon too, although she had her own Meleager,
 Anxiously begged for his help.

310

The cause of the trouble

Was a boar, servant and avenger of an outraged Diana.
 They say that Oeneus, king of Calydon,
 Giving thanks for a bounteous harvest,
 Offered the firstfruits to Ceres, wine to Bacchus,
 And poured to blond Pallas libations of oil.
 From the rural deities to the gods of high heaven,
 Each received due honor. Only Diana's altar
 Was left without incense. Gods can get really angry.

320

"This will not go unpunished," she said to herself.
 Although we may be unhonored, it will not be said
 We are unavenged."

And the scorned goddess sent
 An avenging boar through Oeneus' fields,
 A boar as big as the bulls that graze in Epirus,
 Bigger than Sicilian bulls. His eyes blazed
 With blood and fire; he had a long, thick neck;
 His bristles were like a forest of spear shafts;
 His hoarse grunts came out with steaming foam
 That lathered his shoulders; his tusks were as long
 As an Indian elephant's; lightning issued
 From his mouth, and his breath burned vegetation.
 He tramples the green shoots of the growing grain,
 And now he destroys the mature crop of a farmer
 Doomed to mourn, cutting off the ripe ears.
 Entire vineyards heavy with grapes are leveled
 And branches with their olives are ripped from trees.
 He savages cattle too. Neither shepherds nor dogs
 Can protect their flocks, nor bulls their herds.
 The people run off everywhere and don't feel safe

340

Except behind city walls.

Finally Meleager

And a picked band of young heroes assembled,
 Bound for glory:

The twin sons of Leda,

The boxer Pollux and Castor the horseman;
 Jason, who built the first ship; the best friends
 Theseus and Pirihoüs; the two sons of Thestius;
 Lynceus and swift Idas, sons of Aphareus;
 Caeneus, no longer a woman; fierce Leucippus
 And Acastus the spearman; Hippothoös
 And Dryas; Amyntor's son Phoenix;
 Actor's two sons and Elean Phyleus.

350

Telamon was there too, and great Achilles' father;
 Admetus, son of Pheres, and Boeotian Iolaus,
 Impulsive Eurytion, Echion the great runner;
 Locrian Lelex, Panopeus, Hyleus

And ferocious Hippasus; Nestor, who was then
 In the prime of his life; those whom Hippocoön
 Sent from ancient Amyclae; Laertes,

360

Penelope's father-in-law; Arcadian Ancaeus;
 Ampycus' son, the prophet Mopsus; Amphiarus,
 Oecleus' son, not yet undone by his wife;
 And Alalanta, pride of the Arcadian woods.

A polished pin fastened her robe at the neck,

Her hair was pulled back in a simple knot.

Her arrows rattled in an ivory quiver

Hanging from her left shoulder, and her left hand

Held her bow. That was how she was dressed.

370

Her face was one that you could truly say

Was girlish for a boy and for a girl boyish.

For Meleager it was love at first sight

(Denied by a deity), and he felt the heat,

Saying to himself, "What a lucky guy

If that girl ever says yes." It was not the time—

And he was embarrassed—for him to say more.

The great contest was about to begin.

There was a virgin forest, dense and primeval,
 Running from the plain to the slope of a valley.
 When the heroes reached it, some stretched the nets,
 Others slipped the dogs from their leashes, and some
 Followed the boar's well-marked trail, eager to meet
 Their mortal peril. At the bottom of the valley
 The rainwater drained into a marshy spot
 Overgrown with willows, swamp grass, and rushes
 And with an undergrowth of reeds. It was from here
 The boar was flushed out and came at his tormentors
 Like lightning from a cloud. The grove was laid low
 By his charge, and the battered trees crashed
 As the heroes yelled and clenched their spears
 With their broad iron heads pointed toward the boar.
 He kept coming, scattering the baying dogs
 With sidelong thrusts of his tusks as one by one
 They tried to impede his furious onrush.
 Echion cast first, but his throw was wasted.
 The spear sticking lightly in a maple tree.
 The next, thrown by Jason, would have pierced
 The boar's back, but had too much force and went long.
 Then Mopsus prayed,

"Apollo, if I have ever and still do
 Worship you, let my spear hit its mark."

The god did his best
 To answer his prayer. The boar was hit but uninjured.
 Diana had snapped the iron off from the spear in flight
 And the shaft arrived without any point.
 The beast's anger now burned no less gently than lightning.
 Fire gleamed from his eye and breathed from his throat,
 And as a huge rock launched by a catapult
 Heads toward soldiers stationed on walls and towers,
 So too, with that kind of irresistible power, the boar
 Rushed on the heroes, flattening Eupalamus
 And Pelagon, who manned the right wing. Their comrades
 Carried them off. But Enaësimus, son of Hippocoön,
 Did not escape the boar's fatal stroke. As he turned to run
 In terror, he was hamstrung and his muscles failed.

Pylia Nestor would have never made it to Troy,
 But with a supreme effort he planted his spear
 And vaulted into a tree, from whose branches
 He looked down in safety at his enemy below.
 He was whetting his tusks on the trunk of an oak,
 An ominous sign, and with renewed confidence
 In his sharpened weapons he sliced through the thigh
 Of great Hippasus with a hooking stroke.
 And now Castor and Pollux, not yet stars in the sky
 But still conspicuous among the rest, came riding up
 On horses whiter than snow, pumped their spears
 And sent them humming through the air. Both would have
 Hit the boar, too, except that the beast took cover
 In a thicket, where neither horse nor spear could follow.
 Telamon did try to follow, but got careless and tripped
 Over a root, and while Peleus was helping him up
 Atalanta notched an arrow on the string and let fly.
 It grazed the boar's back and stuck beneath his ear,
 Staining the bristles red with a trickle of blood.
 She was not happier over her shot's success
 Than Meleager was. He saw the blood first
 And was the first to point it out to his comrades.

"You will be honored," he said, "for this bold achievement!"
 The men's faces turned red, and they spurred each other on,
 Their spirits rising as they shouted and hurled spears
 But in no good order, their very volume preventing
 Any from hitting the target. Then Ancaeus,
 Himself an Arcadian, armed with a battle-axe
 And determined to meet his destiny, cried out,

"All right, boys, let's find out how much a man's weapons
 Outweigh a girl's. Leave this to me. I don't care
 If Diana herself protects this boar with her arrows.
 I'm taking this animal down, Diana or not!"

That was his boast, all swollen with pride,
 And he lifted the axe overhead with both hands,
 Standing on tiptoe and ready to strike. The boar

Went for his adversary's most vulnerable spot,
 Both tusks slashing fiercely at the top of the groin.
 Ancaeus went down, his entrails flowing out
 Along with his blood; the ground was soaked with gore.
 When Ixion's son, Pirithoüs, advanced on the enemy
 Balancing a hunting spear in his strong right hand,
 Theseus called to him,

“Back away, O dearer to me
 Than I am to myself, half of my soul, stop!
 It's all right for the brave to fight from a distance.
 Ancaeus' rash valor has done him no good.”

460

As he spoke he hurled his heavy hardwood spear
 Tipped with bronze, but although it was well thrown
 And looked like an answer to all their prayers,
 A leafy branch of an oak tree turned it aside.
 Then Jason hurled his javelin, which, as it happened,
 Swerved off and killed a perfectly good hound,
 Passing through his flanks and pinning him down.
 But Meleager showed a different hand. He threw
 Two spears; one of these punched into the earth,
 But the other one stuck in the spine of the beast.

470

While the boar spins around and around in his rage,
 Spewing foam and fresh blood, Jason presses on,
 Jabbing at him and driving him mad until at last
 He buries his hunting spear deep in the shoulder.
 The others go wild, shouting applause and crowding around
 To clasp hands with the victor. They gaze in wonder
 At the huge carcass covering so much ground
 And still are not sure it is safe to touch it,
 But each of them wets his own spear in its blood.

480

Then Meleager, standing with his foot
 Upon that lethal head, spoke to Atalanta:

“Take the spoils, Arcadian, that are mine by right,
 And let my glory come in part to you.”

And he gave her the spoils, the bristling hide
 And the magnificent head with its enormous tusks.
 Both the gift and the giver made Atalanta glad,
 But an envious murmur rose through the company,
 And Thestius' two sons stretched out their arms
 And cried in a loud voice,

“Back off, girl,
 And don't take our honors. And don't be a fool
 Trusting your beauty, or this lovesick giver
 Might not be around for you.”

490

And they took
 The gift from her and from him the right to give.
 This was too much for the son of Mars.

“Learn,”
 He said, “You two who plunder another's right,
 The difference between a threat and a deed.”

And he drained Plexippus' unsuspecting heart
 With sinful steel. His brother Toxeus
 Stood there hesitating, wanting to avenge
 His brother but fearing to share his brother's fate,
 But Meleager cut short his deliberations.

500

While the spear was still warm from its prior victim
 He warmed it again in his brother's blood.

Althea was bringing gifts to the temple
 In thanksgiving for the victory of her son
 When she saw her brothers' corpses carried in.
 She filled the city with her loud lamentation
 And changed her robes from golden to black.
 But when she learned who the murderer was
 All of her grief became a lust for vengeance.

510

There was a log of wood which, when Althea
 Was in labor, the three Fates threw into the fire
 As they spun the thread of Meleager's life.

“We give to you,” they said, “and to this log
The same span of time.”

When the three sisters
Had chanted this prophecy and disappeared,
The mother snatched the burning log from the fire
And doused it with water. It had long been hidden
In the depths of the house, and, kept safe there,
Safeguarded your life for years, young hero.
Now Meleager’s mother brought out this log,
And had her servants pile up pine and kindling.
She lit the unfriendly fire. Four times
She was about to throw the log in the flames,
And four times she stopped. Mother fought sister,
Two names tugging at the one heart she had.
Her cheeks would pale at what she was about to do,
Then her burning anger would glow in her eyes.
At times she was an ominous, threatening figure,
And then you would think her some pitiful thing.
And although her anger had dried up her tears,
Tears would still come. It was like a ship
Driven both by the wind and an opposing tide,
Feeling the two forces at work and yielding
Uneasily to both. So too Thestius’ daughter
Wavered between her uncertain emotions,
Extinguishing her wrath and fanning it again.
But the sister in her begins to prevail
Over the mother, and to appease with blood
Her blood-relatives’ shades, Althea becomes
Pious in her impiety. When the pestilential flames
Reached full strength, she said,
“Let that pyre
Turn my own flesh to ashes.”
And holding
The fateful log in her dire hand, she stood
In her misery before the sepulchral altars
And said:

“Triple goddesses, vengeful Furies,
Eumenides, turn your faces toward these rites.

I avenge, and I do evil. Death must be atoned by death,
Crime added to crime, funeral to funeral.

May mounded grief destroy this accursed house. 550
Shall Oeneus enjoy his victorious son
And Thestius be childless? Better that both grieve.
But may you, new ghosts of my brothers,
Feel my devotion and accept the sacrifice
I offer to the dead at so great a cost,
The doomed tribute of my own womb. Ah,
Where is this taking me? Brothers, forgive
A mother’s heart! My hands cannot finish this.
I confess that he deserves to die, but I cannot bear
To cause his death. But, then, shall he go unscathed, 560
Live victorious, all puffed up with success,
The great lord of Calydon, while the two of you
Are scanty ashes and pale, shivering ghosts?
I will not allow it. Let him die in his malice
And drag to perdition his father’s hopes,
His father’s kingdom and his fatherland’s ruins.
Ah, where is my mother’s mind? A parent’s care?
The misery I endured for ten long months?
O, you should have burned to death as an infant
In that first fire—if only I could have borne it!
You lived by my gift; now you will die
For what you have done. Pay the price for it,
And give back the life I gave to you twice,
Once at your birth, once by saving the log—
Or put me on my brothers’ pyre too. Oh,
I want to and I can’t. What shall I do?
My brothers’ wounds are before my eyes now,
All that blood; and now the name of mother
And a mother’s love are breaking my heart.
God, I am wretched! It isn’t right that you win,
Brothers, but go ahead, win! Just let me have
The solace I give you, and let me follow you.”

Althea spoke, and as she turned her face away
Her trembling hand dropped the mortal log

Into the flames. It groaned, or seemed to groan,
As it flared up and burned in the unwilling fire.

Far away and knowing nothing of this,
Meleager burns in those flames. Feeling
A scorching fire deep inside his body,
It takes all his courage to master the pain.
Yet he grieves that he will die a bloodless
And ignoble death, and he calls Ancaeus
Happy for his wounds. With his last breath
He calls upon his aged father, his brothers,
His devoted sisters, his wife and, with a groan,
Perhaps his mother. The fire intensifies,
And with it the pain. Then both die down,
And fire and pain go out together.
As his spirit slips away into gentle air,
Grey ash slowly veils the glowing coals.

All of Calydon was devastated. Young and old
Lamented, noble and common both groaned.
The women of Calydon by Evenus' waters
Tore their hair and beat their breasts. The father
Lies on the ground and defiles his white hair
And aged head with dust, bitterly complaining
That he has lived too long; for the mother,
Seeing what she had done, has punished herself
With a dagger through her heart. Not if some god
Gave me a hundred speaking mouths, sheer genius,
And all Helicon has, could I ever capture
The lamentation of his wretched sisters.
Without a thought for decency they beat their breasts
Black and blue; caressed their brother's corpse,
While there was a corpse, and caressed it again;
Kissed the body and the bier where it stood;
Scooped up the ashes and pressed them to their breasts;
Threw themselves on his tomb, and clasp the stone
On which his name had been carved, drenched it with tears.
In the end Diana, satisfied with the destruction

Of the house of Parthaon, feathered their bodies—
All of them except Gorge and Deianeira—
Stretched out wings over the length of their arms
And gave them horny beaks, sending them forth
As Meleagrides, guinea hens, into the air.

590

Tales from Acheloius' Feast

Theseus, meanwhile, having played his part
In the heroic hunt, was returning to Athens,
But the Acheloius River, swollen with rain,
Blocked his way.

“Come into my house,”

Said the river god, “illustrious Athenian,
And do not trust my rapacious waters.

630

The current sweeps away solid tree trunks
And tumbles boulders along with a crashing roar.
I have seen great stables that stood on the banks
Hauled off with their flocks, and in that torrent
Neither a bull's strength nor a horse's speed
Does any good at all. Many strong young bodies
Have drowned in the whirlpools when the snowmelt
Pours down from the mountain. Safer to rest
Until the stream flows between its usual banks.”

640

Theseus replied,

“I will use your house,
Acheloius, and your advice.”

610

And he did use both,
Entering the great hall built of porous pumice
And rough tufa. The floor was damp with soft moss,
And purple shells and conches paneled the ceiling.
Hyperion the Sun had measured half the sky
When Theseus and his companions from the hunt
Stretched out on the couches. Ixion's son,
Pirithoius, was there, and Lelex too,
The old hero from Troezen, his hair flecked with grey,
And others whom the Acarnanian river god

650

Had thought worthy to invite. He was delighted
To have such a noble guest. Barefoot nymphs
Wasted no time in setting the tables,
And when the feast was done they poured wine
Into jeweled cups.

Achelōis and the Echinades

Then the noblest of heroes,
Looking out on the level expanse of water,
Pointed with his finger and asked,
“What is the name
Of that island out there—or is it only one island?”

The river god answered,
“No, what you see
Is not one island, but five close together.
The distance blurs their divisions. What Diana did
When she was slighted may seem less odd to you
When you learn the story behind them. Those islands
Once were nymphs. They had slaughtered ten bulls
And invited all of the gods of the countryside
To the sacrifice, but they forgot me
When they led out their festal dances.
I swelled with rage, as full as I ever get,
An angry flash flood tearing forests apart,
Filletting fields. I swept away the nymphs,
Who remembered me then, with the ground they stood on,
Into the sea, and the sea’s waves working with mine
Divided that continuous stretch of land
Into as many parts as the Echinades have
Out there in the water.

Achelōis and Perimele

But beyond the others—
Look and you can see—is the one island I love.
Sailors call it Perimele. She was my beloved,
And I took her virginity. Hippodamas,

Her father, was furious and threw his daughter
Off a high cliff into the deep. She would have perished,
But I caught her, and holding her up as she floated
I prayed,

“Lord of the Trident, whose lot
Is the realm of water next to the world,
Help a girl drowned by her father’s cruelty.
Give her a place, Neptune, or let her become
A place herself.”

While I was speaking,
New earth embraced the girl’s floating body,
And her transformed limbs grew into an island.”

Then the river was silent. Everyone was moved
By this miracle story, except for one,
A man who laughed at believers and scoffed at the gods,
Ferocious in spirit, Ixion’s son Pirithoüs.

“You’re making all this up, Achelotus,” he said,
“And you’re giving too much power to the gods
If you think they can give and take away forms.”

Philemon and Baucis

They were all shocked, and disapproved of such words,
Especially Lelex, mature in judgment and years,
Who said,

“Immense is the power of heaven
And knows no end. Whatever the gods want
Is done, and, to boost your faltering faith,
There is an oak tree right next to a linden
Up in the Phrygian hills, ringed by a low wall.
I saw the spot myself when Pitheus

Sent me to the country his father once ruled.
There’s a marsh close by, once habitable land
But now coots and other waterfowl live there.
Jupiter once went there disguised as a mortal,
And his son Mercury tagged along with him
But without his caduceus or winged sandals.

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Looking for a place to rest, they knocked on
 A thousand doors; a thousand doors stayed shut,
 But one house did let them in, a little one
 Thatched with straw and reeds from the marsh.
 Pious old Baucis lived there with Philemon,
 Who was the same age as his wife. The couple
 Married in that cottage when they were young
 And grew old there together. They made light
 Of their poverty and so bore it easily.
 There were no masters or servants. These two
 Were the whole household, and the same people
 Gave orders and obeyed. So, when the gods arrived
 At this humble hearth and stooped to enter,
 The old man set out a bench and told them
 To sit down and relax, and Baucis bustled up
 And threw on a rough coverlet. She scraped
 The ashes from the fireplace and fanned
 Yesterday's embers, feeding them with leaves
 And dry bark and blowing them into flames
 With her old woman's breath. Then she took down
 Some split wood and dry twigs from the rafters,
 Broke them up and put them under the bronze kettle.

Her husband had picked a cabbage from the garden,
 And she chopped the leaves off from the stalk.
 The old man had a forked stick and was fetching
 A chine of smoked bacon that was hanging
 From a blackened beam. Cutting off a little piece
 Of this long-seasoned pork he put it in the pot
 To boil with the cabbage. They passed the time talking,
 And then put a long cushion stuffed with soft sedge
 Onto a couch with a willow frame and legs.
 They draped this with a cloth that they only used
 On festal occasions, but even this was cheap
 And worn with age. It went well with the couch.
 The gods reclined. The old woman, skirts tucked up,
 Put the table in place with trembling hands.

One of its legs was too short, so she propped it up
 With a broken piece of tile. When she had it level
 She wiped down the table with fresh mint
 And set out some olives, both green and black,
 Autumn cornel cherries pickled in wine lees,
 Endive and radishes, cream cheese, and eggs
 Lightly roasted in warm embers, all served
 In earthenware dishes. After these appetizers
 An embossed mixing bowl, no less silver
 Than the rest of the ware, was put on the table
 Along with beech-wood cups coated inside
 With yellow wax. The steaming main course
 Soon arrived from the hearth, and wine of no great age
 Was served all around. Then a little space was made
 For the dessert: nuts, wrinkled dried dates, plums,
 And fragrant apples served in wide baskets
 Along with purple grapes just picked from the vine.
 A clear white honeycomb was set in the middle.
 Besides all this, they brought to the table
 Cheerful faces, high spirits, and abundant good will.

Meanwhile wine kept welling up in the mixing bowl
 All by itself, so that as often as it was drained
 It was never empty. Baucis and Philemon saw this
 And didn't know what to think. They lifted
 Their upturned hands and prayed, asking pardon
 For the food they served and the poor accoutrements.
 They had one goose, who guarded their little estate,
 And were going to kill it for their divine guests.
 But the goose was swift on the wing and wore out
 The slow old people trying to catch it, dodging them
 For a long time and finally taking refuge
 With the gods themselves, who told them to let it live.

'We are gods,' they said. 'This wicked neighborhood
 Will get its just deserts, but you will be spared.
 Leave your house now and come along with us

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Up the high mountainside.’

The couple obeyed
 And leaning on their staffs they struggled step by step
 Up the long slope. When they were within a bowshot
 Of the summit, they looked back and saw
 Everything covered with water, except their house.
 While they wondered at this, and wept for their friends,
 The old house, which had been too small for two,
 Turned into a temple. Forked poles became columns,
 The thatch grew yellow and became a golden roof,
 Figured gates appeared, and marble pavement
 Covered the ground. Then Jupiter said calmly,

‘And now, just old man, and woman worthy
 Of your just husband, ask whatever you want.’

After he and Baucis had talked a little,
 Philemon told the gods their joint decision:

‘We ask to be your priests and your temple’s caretakers,
 And, since we’ve spent our lives together in harmony,
 We ask to be taken the very same hour, so that I
 May never see my wife’s tomb, nor she bury me.’

Their prayer was answered. They took care of the temple
 For the rest of their lives, until one day,
 Old and worn out, they happened to be standing
 In front of the sacred steps, talking about the place
 And all that had happened there, when Philemon
 Saw Baucis, and Baucis saw Philemon
 Sprouting leaves. As the canopy grew
 Over their faces, they cried out while they could
 The same words together, ‘Good-bye, my love,
 Just as the bark closed over their lips.
 To this day the Bithynians who live there
 Point out two trees growing close together
 From a double trunk. These things were told to me
 By sober old men with no reason to lie.

I certainly saw wreaths hanging from the branches
 And when I put a fresh one there myself, I said,

‘Whom the gods love are gods. Adore and be adored.’”

Erysichthon

Lelex ended here; both the tale and the teller
 Moved them all, and especially Theseus.

He wanted to hear more about the gods’ miracles,
 And so the Calydonian river god,
 Leaning on one elbow, said this to him:

“There are some, great hero, whose form never varies
 Once it has been changed; others have the power
 Of assuming many forms, such as you, Proteus,
 Who live in the encircling sea. Sometimes you are seen
 As a young man, sometimes a lion or a raging boar;
 A snake no one would want to touch; or horns
 Might make you into a bull; you could be a stone,
 Or take the form of running water, a river,
 Or you could be the enemy of water, fire.

Erysichthon’s daughter, who married Autolycus,
 Had this kind of power. This Erysichthon
 Scorned the gods and burnt no sacrifices
 On their altars. He even violated,

The story goes, the sacred grove of Ceres,
 Chopping down those ancient trees with an axe.
 Among them stood an enormous oak, its wood
 Strong with years, a grove in itself. On it hung
 Wool fillets, votive tablets, and wreaths of flowers,
 Memorials of earnest prayers answered.

The wood nymphs often held their festival dances
 Under this tree, circling with their hands joined
 The mighty trunk that was fifteen ells around,
 And the rest of the trees were as far below it
 As the grass was below them. Yet Erysichthon,
 For all that the tree was, did not hold back his axe.

He had ordered his slaves to cut it down,
But when he saw them cringing from his commands,
He snatched an axe from one of them and said,

‘Whether this be the goddess’ tree, or even
The goddess herself, it’s coming to the ground.’

He spoke, and while he held his axe poised
For a slanting stroke, the oak of Deo groaned,
Its leaves and acorns grew pale, and the pallor
Began to spread throughout its long branches.
When the sacrilegious stroke cut into the trunk,
Blood poured out from the crushed, shattered bark,
As it does from the cloven neck of a bull
When it falls at the altar as a sacrifice.

The men were all astonished, and one of them,
Bolder than the rest, tried to stop this atrocity
And stay the cruel axe. But Erysichthon
Just looked at the man and said,

‘Take that
For your pious thoughts,’
as he turned the axe
From the tree to the man and lopped off his head.
Then, as he cut into the oak again and again,
A voice came out from the middle of the tree:

‘I am a nymph most dear to Ceres, alive
In this timber, and I foretell as I die
Punishment for your crime, solace for my death.’

Still, he saw his crime through, and finally the tree,
Tottering from innumerable blows and pulled by ropes,
Crashed down, its bulk crushing much of the grove.

The dryad sisterhood were stunned at their own
And their forest’s loss. Wearing black for mourning
They went to Ceres and prayed, asking her
To punish Erysichthon. The beautiful goddess

Nodded in assent, and with that motion
Shook the heavy fields of ripening grain.
Then she devised a method of punishment, pitiable
Were there anything pitiable in what he had done.
She would torture the man with dreadful Famine.
But she couldn’t go herself, since Fate had decreed
That Famine and Ceres never come together,
So she summoned an oroad down from the mountains
And addressed the rustic deity like this:

‘There is a place on the far edge of Scythia,
A glacial land, gloomy, without anything growing,
No crops, not a tree. Lethargic Cold lives there,
Pallor and Tremor—and emaciated Famine.
She is to ensconce herself in the sinful stomach
Of that sacrilegious man. No abundance
Is to satisfy her, and she is to overcome
Even my power to feed. And so you won’t dread
The rather long journey, take my chariot
And drive my dragons across the steep sky!’

The nymph, airborne in her borrowed chariot,
Touched down in Scythia on a mountain peak
(They call it Caucasus) and unyoked the dragons.
She found Famine in a stony field, scrounging
Scrawny weeds with her nails and teeth. Her hair

Was all matted, her eyes sunken, her face pale;
Her lips were a dirty grey, her throat scaly.
Her skin so taut you could see her guts through it;
Her hips were bony knots under hollow loins,
Her belly just a place for a belly; her breast
Seemed to hang suspended from her scrawny spine;
Her gauntness made all her joints seem large;
Her kneecaps were swollen, her ankles lumps.

When the nymph saw her from afar—she didn’t dare
Get close—she delivered the goddess’ orders.
Though she hadn’t stayed long and kept her distance,

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She still seemed very hungry as she drove
The aerial dragons back to Thessaly.

Famine did what Ceres said, even though their roles
Are forever opposed. She flew on the wind
And got off at Erysichthon's mansion,
Entering promptly the impious ruler's room.
It was night, and he was lost in slumber.
Wrapping her arms around him she injected herself
Into his body by breathing on his mouth,
His throat and his chest, sowing hunger
Deep in his veins. Having discharged her duty,
She left the fertile world and made her way back
To the barren realms and her familiar caves.

Gentle Sleep still soothed Erysichthon
On peaceful wings. He dreamed about a feast,
Gnawing on fantasies, and cheating
His gullet with imagined food, devouring
Instead of a banquet only empty air.
But when he awoke, a furious appetite
Raged in his jaws and in his burning stomach.
Without a moment's delay he calls for everything
That sea and land and air can produce,
And with tables of food complains of hunger,
Looking for feasts in the middle of feasts.
What would be enough for a city, enough
For a whole nation, is not enough for one.

The more he crams down his maw the more he wants,
And as the ocean receives all the rivers on earth
Yet does not have enough but drinks in the streams;
And as voracious fire never refuses fuel
But burns countless logs, and the more it is fed
The more it wants, quantity increasing its greed:
So too the mouth of irreligious Erysichthon
Devouring banquets and always asking for more.
Food for him only occasions more food,
And by always eating he is forever empty.

And now hunger and the maelstrom of his belly
Have exhausted all of his ancestral stores,
But ravenous Famine still raged unabated
In his burning gullet. When his entire fortune
Had gone into his belly, only his daughter,
Worthy of a better father, was left. Destitute,
He sold her too. But the spirited girl
Refused to have a master. Stretching her hands
Over the sea, she prayed,

'Save me from slavery,
You who have stolen my virginity from me!'

That would be Neptune, who now granted her prayer,
And although her master, who had followed her,
Had just now seen her, the god transformed her
Into a fisherman, with all the clothing and gear.
Looking at her, her master said,

'You with the rod,
Baiting your hook, I wish you calm seas, trusting fish,
And bona fide strikes, if you'll only tell me
Where she is, the girl with cheap clothes and straggly hair
Who was just now standing on the shore here.
I saw her myself, right here, and her footprints
Don't lead any farther.'

She saw that the god's gift
Was working well, and delighted to be asked herself
About herself, she responded like this:

'I beg your pardon, whoever you are,
But I have not taken my eyes from this pool
To look anywhere else. I've been concentrating
On my fishing. But, so help me Neptune,
No one has been here for quite some time now,
No man and no woman, except for me.'

He believed her and walked away on the sand,
Completely taken in. Then her former shape
Was restored to her. But when her father learned

That she had the ability to change her form
He sold her again and again, to many new owners,
Sometimes as a mare, a bird, a cow, or a deer,
And off she would go, keeping her father in food,
Albeit unjustly. When his terrible malady
Exhausted these provisions too, only adding
To his fatal disease, he began to take bites
Out of his own limbs, and in his misery
Fed himself by consuming his body.

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But why spend my time talking about others?
I myself, young heroes, have often changed forms,
Although my power is limited to only a few,
Sometimes I am seen as you see me now,
Sometimes I switch to a serpent, and sometimes
I put my strength into horns as leader of the herd,
Into horns, that is, when I still could. But now,
As you see, part of my forehead's weaponry
Is quite missing."

He ended his speech with a groan.