

## **PROMETHEUS**

I feel the wings of the eagle  
Stretch wide the lips of my liver;  
I feel its talons,  
I feel its iron beak,  
I feel the enormity of its hunger for life,  
Its thirst for flight  
With me in its talons.  
And I fly.

Whoever said I was chained?

**MARIN SORESCU (1936 – 1996)**

## **LEDA**

Come not with kisses  
Not with caresses  
Of hands and lips and murmurings;  
Come with the hiss of wings  
And sea-touch tip of a beak  
And treading of wet, webbed, wave-working feet  
Into the marsh-soft belly.

**D.H. LAWRENCE (1885 – 1930)**

## A HYMN TO BACCHUS

Bacchus, let me drink no more!  
Wild are seas that want a shore!  
When our drinking has no stint,  
There is no one pleasure in't.  
I have drank up for to please  
Thee, that great cup, Hercules.  
Urge no more; and there shall be  
Daffadils giv'n up to thee.

**ROBERT HERRICK (1591 – 1634)**

## LANDSCAPE WITH THE FALL OF ICARUS

According to Brueghel  
when Icarus fell  
it was spring

a farmer was ploughing  
his field  
the whole pageantry

of the year was  
awake tingling  
near

the edge of the sea  
concerned  
with itself

sweating in the sun  
that melted  
the wings' wax

unsignificantly  
off the coast  
there was

a splash quite unnoticed  
this was  
Icarus drowning

**WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS (1883–1963)**

## ARGUS

When wise Ulysses, from his native coast  
Long kept by wars, and long by tempests toss'd,  
Arrived at last, poor, old, disguised, alone,  
To all his friends, and ev'n his Queen unknown,  
Changed as he was, with age, and toils, and cares,  
Furrow'd his rev'rend face, and white his hairs,  
In his own palace forc'd to ask his bread,  
Scorn'd by those slaves his former bounty fed,  
Forgot of all his own domestic crew,  
The faithful Dog alone his rightful master knew!

Unfed, unhous'd, neglected, on the clay  
Like an old servant now cashier'd, he lay;  
Touch'd with resentment of ungrateful man,  
And longing to behold his ancient lord again.  
Him when he saw he rose, and crawl'd to meet,  
('Twas all he could) and fawn'd and kiss'd his feet,  
Seiz'd with dumb joy; then falling by his side,  
Own'd his returning lord, look'd up, and died!

**ALEXANDER POPE (1688—1744)**

## **DAPHNE**

Why do you follow me? –  
Any moment I can be  
Nothing but a laurel-tree.

Any moment of the chase  
I can leave you in my place  
A pink bough for your embrace.

Yet if over hill and hollow  
Still it is your will to follow,  
I am off; – to heel, Apollo!

**EDNA ST. VINCENT MALLAY (1892 – 1950)**

## **MEDUSA**

I had come to the house, in a cave of trees,  
Facing a sheer sky.  
Everything moved, -- a bell hung ready to strike,  
Sun and reflection wheeled by.

When the bare eyes were before me  
And the hissing hair,  
Held up at a window, seen through a door.  
The stiff bald eyes, the serpents on the forehead  
Formed in the air.

This is a dead scene forever now.  
Nothing will ever stir.  
The end will never brighten it more than this,  
Nor the rain blur.

The water will always fall, and will not fall,  
And the tipped bell make no sound.  
The grass will always be growing for hay  
Deep on the ground.

And I shall stand here like a shadow  
Under the great balanced day,  
My eyes on the yellow dust, that was lifting in the wind,  
And does not drift away.

**LOUISE BOGAN (1897 – 1970)**

## **ORPHEUS**

Orpheus with his lute made trees  
And the mountain tops that freeze  
Bow themselves when he did sing:  
To his music plants and flowers  
Ever sprung; as sun and showers  
There had made a lasting spring.

Every thing that heard him play,  
Even the billows of the sea,  
Hung their heads and then lay by.  
In sweet music is such art,  
Killing care and grief of heart  
Fall asleep, or hearing, die.

**WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE (1564 – 1616)**

## **PENELOPE**

In the pathway of the sun,  
In the footsteps of the breeze,  
Where the world and sky are one,  
He shall ride the silver seas,  
He shall cut the glittering wave.  
I shall sit at home, and rock;  
Rise, to heed a neighbor's knock;  
Brew my tea, and snip my thread;  
Bleach the linen for my bed.  
They will call him brave.

**DOROTHY PARKER (1893 – 1967)**

## **PERSEUS**

Her sleeping head with its great gelid mass  
of serpents torpidly astir  
burned into the mirroring shield--  
a scathing image dire  
as hated truth the mind accepts at last  
and festers on.  
I struck. The shield flashed bare.

Yet even as I lifted up the head  
and started from that place  
of gazing silences and terrored stone,  
I thirsted to destroy.  
None could have passed me then--  
no garland-bearing girl, no priest  
or staring boy--and lived.

**ROBERT HAYDEN (1913 – 1980)**

## SIBYL

THIS is the glamour of the world antique:  
The thyme-scents of Hymettus\* fill the air,  
And in the grass narcissus-cups are fair.  
The full brook wanders through the ferns to seek  
The amber haunts of bees; and on the peak  
Of the soft hill, against the gold-marged sky,  
She stands, a dream from out the days gone by.  
Entreat her not. Indeed, she will not speak!  
Her eyes are full of dreams; and in her ears  
There is the rustle of immortal wings;  
And ever and anon the slow breeze bears  
The mystic murmur of the songs she sings.  
Entreat her not: she sees thee not, nor hears  
Aught but the sights and sounds of bygone springs.

*\*mountain range near Athens*

**JOHN HOWARD PAYNE (1791 – 1852)**

**From *PROMETHEUS UNBOUND***

The crawling glaciers pierce me with the spears  
Of their moon-freezing crystals; the bright chains  
Eat with their burning cold into my bones.  
Heaven's winged hound, polluting from thy lips  
His beak in poison not his own, tears up  
My heart; and shapeless sights come wandering by,  
The ghastly people of the realm of dream,  
Mocking me; and the Earthquake-fiends are charged  
To wrench the rivets from my quivering wounds  
When the rocks split and close again behind.

**PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY (1792 – 1822)**

**DESCRIPTION OF HELEN** *from Doctor Faustus*

Was this the face that launch'd a thousand ships,  
And burnt the topless towers of Ilium?  
Sweet Helen, make me immortal with a kiss.  
Her lips suck forth my soul: see, where it flies!  
Come, Helen, come, give me my soul again.  
Here will I dwell, for heaven is in these lips,  
And all is dross that is not Helena.

**CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE (1564 – 1593)**

## WHY WAS CUPID A BOY?

Why was Cupid a boy,  
And why a boy was he?  
He should have been a girl,  
For aught that I can see.

For he shoots with his bow,  
And the girl shoots with her eye,  
And they both are merry and glad,  
And laugh when we do cry.

And to make Cupid a boy  
Was the Cupid girl's mocking plan;  
For a boy can't interpret the thing  
Till he is become a man.

And then he's so pierc'd with cares,  
And wounded with arrowy smarts,  
That the whole business of his life  
Is to pick out the heads of the darts.

'Twas the Greeks' love of war  
Turn'd Love into a boy,  
And woman into a statue of stone--  
And away fled every joy.

**WILLIAM BLAKE (1757 – 1827)**

## **IPHIGENIA**

"I was cut off from hope in that sad place,  
Which yet to name my spirit loathes and fears;  
My father held his hand upon his face;  
I, blinded by my tears,

Still strove to speak; my voice was thick with sighs,  
As in a dream. Dimly I could decry  
The stern black-bearded kings, with wolfish eyes,  
Waiting to see me die.

The tall masts quivered as they lay afloat,  
The temples and the people and the shore;  
One drew a sharp knife through my tender throat  
Slowly, and – nothing more."

**ALFRED, LORD TENNYSON (1809 – 1892)**

## **LEDA and the SWAN**

A sudden blow: the great wings beating still  
Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed  
By his dark webs, her nape caught in his bill,  
He holds her helpless breast upon his breast.

How can those terrified vague fingers push  
The feathered glory from her loosening thighs?  
How can anybody, laid in that white rush,  
But feel the strange heart beating where it lies?

A shudder in the loins, engenders there  
The broken wall, the burning roof and tower  
And Agamemnon dead.  
Being so caught up,  
So mastered by the brute blood of the air,  
Did she put on his knowledge with his power  
Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?

**WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS (1865 – 1939)**

## **EURYDICE TO ORPHEUS**

But give them me, the mouth, the eyes, the brow!  
Let them once more absorb me! One look now  
Will lap me round for ever, not to pass  
Out of its light, though darkness lies beyond:  
Hold me but safe again within the bond  
Of one immortal look! All woe that was,  
Forgotten, and all terror that may be,  
Defied – no past is mine, no future: look at me!

**ROBERT BROWNING (1812–1889)**

**FROM BRITANIA'S PASTORALS**

Venus by Adonis' side  
Crying kissed, and kissing cried  
Wrung her hands and tore her hair,  
For Adonis dying there.

"Stay," quoth she, "O stay and live!  
Nature surely doth not give  
To the earth her sweetest flowers  
To be seen but some few hours."

On his face, still as he bled,  
For each drop a tear she shed,  
Which she kissed or wiped away,  
Else had drowned him where he lay.

"Fair Proserpina," quoth she,  
"Shall not have thee yet from me,  
Nor thy soul to fly begin  
While my lips can keep it in."

Here she closed again. And some  
Say Apollo would have come  
To have cured his wounded limb,  
But that she had smothered him.

**WILLIAM BROWNE (1590 – 1645)**

## **EROS**

O Eros, silently smiling one, hear me.  
Let the shadow of thy wings  
Brush me.  
Let thy presence  
Enfold me, as if darkness  
Were swandown.  
Let me see that darkness  
Lamp in hand,  
This country become  
The other country  
Sacred to desire.

Drowsy god,  
Slow the wheels of my thought  
So that I listen only  
To the snowfall hush of  
Thy circling.  
Close my beloved with me  
In the smoke ring of thy power,  
That we may be, each to the other,  
Figures of flame,  
Figures of smoke,  
Figures of flesh  
Newly seen in the dusk.

**DENISE LEVERTOV (1923 – 1997)**

## **DRYAD**

Birch, cool  
With sap, tree, your breath  
In my hands, tense  
Bark, a yielding glass,  
But to feel deeper  
Stirrings, the stretching  
In the trunk,  
Towards the branches.

Let  
Your hair fall,  
Fall in your neck, I hear  
Through the coolness, I hear a fluttering,  
Hear the current lift,  
The rising flood,  
Hear ecstasy  
Sing in my ear.

**JOHANNES BOBROWSKI (1917 – 1965)**

## CHARON'S COSMOLOGY

With only his dim lantern  
To tell him where he is  
And every time a mountain  
Of fresh corpses to load up

Take them to the other side  
Where there are plenty more  
I'd say by now he must be confused  
As to which side is which

I'd say it doesn't matter  
No one complains he's got  
Their pockets to go through  
In one a crust of bread in another a sausage

Once in a long while a mirror  
Or a book which he throws  
Overboard into the dark river  
Swift and cold and deep

**CHARLES SIMIC (1938 – )**

## **EURYDICE**

He is here, come down to look for you.  
It is the song that calls you back,  
A song of joy and suffering  
Equally: a promise:  
That things will be different up there  
Than they were the last time.

You would rather have gone on feeling nothing,  
Emptiness and silence; this stagnant peace  
Of the deepest sea, which is easier  
Than the noise and flesh of the surface.

You are used to these blanched dim corridors,  
You are used to the king  
Who passes you without speaking.

The other one is different  
And you almost remember him.  
He says he is singing to you  
Because he loves you,

Not as you are now,  
So chilled and minimal: moving and still  
Both, like a white curtain blowing  
In the draft from a half-opened window  
Beside a chair on which nobody sits.

**MARGARET ATWOOD (1939– )**

## **EURYDICE**

Eurydice is impossible  
If Orpheus looks away  
Eurydice doubts and weeps  
If Orpheus looks at her  
Eurydice dies

**THOMAS MERTON (1915 – 1968)**

## **PSYCHE with the CANDLE**

Love which is the most difficult mystery  
Asking from every young one answers  
And most from those most eager and most beautiful –  
Love is a bird in a fist:  
To hold it hides it, to look at it lets it go.  
It will twist loose if you lift so much as a finger.  
It will stay if you cover it – stay but unknown and invisible.  
Either you keep it forever with fist closed  
Or let it fling  
Singing in fervor and sun and in song vanish.  
There is no answer other to this mystery.

**ARCHIBALD MacLEISH (1892 – 1982)**

## **THE LABYRINTH**

Zeus, Zeus himself could not undo these nets  
Of stone encircling me. My mind forgets  
The person I have been along the way,  
The hated way of monotonous walls,  
Which is my fate. The galleries seem straight  
But curve furtively, forming secret circles  
At the terminus of years; and the parapets  
Have been worn smooth by the passage of days.  
Here in the tepid, alabaster dust,  
Are tracks that frighten me. The hollow air  
Of evening sometimes brings a bellowing,  
Or the echo, desolate, of bellowing.  
I know that hidden in the shadows there  
Lurks another, whose task is to exhaust  
The loneliness that brains and weaves this hell,  
To crave my blood, and to fatten on my death.  
We seek each other. Oh, if only this  
Were the last day of our antithesis!

**JORGE LUIS BORGES (1899 – 1986)**

## MYTH

Long afterward, Oedipus, old and blinded, walked the Roads.

He smelled a familiar smell.

It was the Sphinx.

Oedipus said, "I want to ask one question.

Why didn't I recognize my mother?"

"You gave the wrong answer," said the Sphinx.

"But that was what made everything possible," said Oedipus.

"No," she said. When I asked, what walks on four legs in the morning,

Two at noon and three in the evening, you answered,

Man.

You didn't say anything about woman."

"When you say Man," said Oedipus,

"You include women too.

Everyone knows that."

She said, "That's what you think."

**MURIEL RUKEYSER (1913–1980)**

## SIREN SONG

This is the one song everyone  
would like to learn: the song  
that is irresistible:

the song that forces men  
to leap overboard in squadrons  
even though they see the beached skulls

the song nobody knows  
because anybody who has heard it  
is dead, and the others can't remember.

Shall I tell you the secret  
and if I do, will you get me  
out of this bird suit?

I don't enjoy it here  
squatting on this island  
looking picturesque and mythical

with these two feathery maniacs,  
I don't enjoy singing  
this trio, fatal and valuable.

I will tell the secret to you,  
to you, only to you.  
Come closer. This song

is a cry for help: Help me!  
Only you, only you can,  
you are unique

at last. Alas  
it is a boring song  
but it works every time.

**MARGARET ATWOOD (1939 – )**

## **YOU ARE ODYSSEUS**

You are Odysseus  
returning home each evening  
tentative, a little angry.  
And I who thought to be  
one of the Sirens (cast up  
on strewn sheets  
at dawn)  
hide my song  
under my tongue –  
merely Penelope after all.  
Meanwhile the old wars  
go on, their dim music  
can be heard even at night.  
You leave each morning,  
soon our son will follow.  
Only my weaving is real.

**LINDA PASTAN (1932 –)**