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 – 1674)
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

insignificantly
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 UNBOND*

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 BRITTANIA’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—)