

Nisus and Scylla

And now when Lucifer had driven off
 the night, revealing the next brand-new day,
 the east wind fell and wet, dark clouds arose;
 the south wind mildly offered safe return
 to Cephalus and his assembled troops,
 bringing them home much sooner than expected.

Meanwhile, along Megara's coast, King Minos
 was pillaging, and trying out his forces
 against its capital, now held by Nisus,
 who had, among the venerable locks
 of grey upon his head, a tuft of purple,
 which guaranteed the safety of his realm.

The war was entering its sixth month, still
 undecided, as wingèd Victory
 flew back and forth uncertainly between
 the two combatants. A royal tower rose
 upon those singing walls, where, it is said,
 Apollo had set his golden lyre down:
 its music lingered still within the stones.

In peacetime, Scylla, daughter of King Nisus,
 would often come and toss a pebble here
 to make the rocks sing; now, in time of war,
 she came as often to observe the duels,
 and as the war dragged on, not only learned
 the names of the chief contenders on both sides,
 but recognized them by the arms they bore,
 their horses, styles of dress, and Cretan quivers;
 she knew Europa's son the best of all,
 the countenance of Minos being more
 familiar to her than it should have been.

What if his face is hidden in a helmet?
 Why, helmets frame his beauty! And that shield
 he carries, hammered out of gleaming bronze—

10

20

30

OVID

METAMORPHOSES



TRANSLATED AND WITH NOTES BY

CHARLES MARTIN



INTRODUCTION BY
 BERNARD KNOX



W.W. NORTON & COMPANY NEW YORK LONDON

how well the gleaming shield becomes the man!
 And does he cast his javelin with vigor?
 Then she commends his skillful manliness.
 And does he draw the bowstring to his ear?
 Why, no—that must be Phoebus with the bow!

But when he raised his visor to reveal
 his countenance, and purple-cloaked, he clenched
 his horse's back and sat that milk-white steed, 40
 using the reins upon its foaming jaws,
 why then, the virgin daughter of King Nisus
 lost herself almost, almost lost her mind:
 happy the spear that his hand grasped, she thought,
 and happy the reins that lay within his grip.

She would go off to him, were it permitted,
 a virgin treading through the enemy lines,
 or from her tower fly into his camp,
 or turn the city over to the foe— 50
 or do whatever else Minos might wish.

As she sat gazing at his tents, she said,
 “What should I feel about this dreadful war?
 Should I rejoice or grieve? I cannot say:
 I grieve for my beloved enemy,
 but without war, I never would have known him!
 Were I his hostage, he could end it now,
 I'd be with him and be his pledge of peace!

“If she who bore you were as beautiful
 as you are, O my loveliest of kings, 60
 no wonder, then, that Jove was mad for her!
 Thrice happy would I be if I had wings
 to fly into his camp, and there confess
 my passion for him and demand to know
 what dowry the great king would have me for!

“As long as it were not my city's life!
 Far better that my dreams of marriage die

than that they should be realized by treason!
 —Though many, on the other hand, have found it
 most useful to be vanquished by a foe 70
 who, when appeased, grants them his clemency.

“And certainly, he wages a just war
 of retribution for his murdered son;
 his motive will prevail, as will the arms
 advancing it. I think that we are lost.

“Then, if it is the end for our city,
 why should his martial skills, and not my love,
 unbolt the gates? Much better would it be
 for him to conquer us without delay,
 without exterminating our folk 80
 or being hurt himself. That being so,
 Minos, I'll have no cause to fear, unless
 someone should unintentionally wound you,
 for who could be so cruel as to dare
 deliberately cast a spear at you?

“These undertakings please me. I resolve
 to surrender to him, and give my country
 as my dowry—and by acting, end the war.

“But mere desire will not be enough!
 A sentry guards my father in his sleep: 90
 my father holds the keys that keep the city;
 he is the source of all my fear and sorrow,
 and he alone delays my love's fulfillment:
 would that the gods could make me fatherless!

“But each of us is his own divinity,
 and Fortune spurns the coward's useless prayers.
 Another woman in my situation
 would long ago have happily destroyed
 whatever stood between her and her love!

“Why should another be more brave than I? 100
 I would endure the fire and the sword,

but in this situation, there's no need
for sword or fire: all that I have need of
is but a single lock of my father's hair!
That would be far more valuable than gold!
One lock of purple hair will make me blest,
and give me everything that I've desired."

Now Night, the greatest nurse of mortal cares,
broke in on these reflections; in the darkness,
her boldness grew. In time of first repose,
when Slumber finds its way into the heart
exhausted by its daily round, the daughter
slips silently into her father's chambers
and robs him of his fated lock of hair.

Oh, what an awful crime! And with this prize
she flees the city, passing through its foes,
and confident of her reception comes
and makes her presentation to the king,
who quails at the sight of her:

"Love has led me
into this betrayal; I am Scylla,
the daughter of King Nisus; I surrender
myself, my nation, and my gods as well,
and seek no other recompense but you;
receive this pledge that guarantees my love,
this purple lock—which is no lock at all,
but my father's head!"

She stretched out her foul hand
with the proffered gift as Minos shrank away,
shocked by the sight of this unholy act:
"Shame of the age," he said, "may the gods forbid you
their kingdom, and may land and sea deny you!
Be sure that I will never let so vile
a monster into Crete, which is my realm
and the sacred cradle of the infant Jove!"

That upright leader spoke, and, just as soon
as terms had been imposed upon the vanquished,
ordered his captains to release their moorings,
and the bronze-keeled fleet was rowed away from shore.

Once Scylla saw the ships already launched
and realized that their commander had
no notion of rewarding her wrongdoing,
and that her prayers were pointless, she became
enraged with him, and with her arms outstretched
and hair disheveled, cried out in a frenzy:
"Where do you run to now, abandoning
the only reason for your victory?"

Where do you flee, you savage man, who took
my nation and my father's place? To whom
our victory was both my crime and glory!
Are you unmoved by all I've done for you?
Unmoved by my great passion and my trust?

"Where can I go, abandoned? To my homeland?
It has been conquered. Suppose it hadn't been:
my treachery has closed it off to me.
Should I return now to my father's presence?
But I've already given him to you!"

"My countrymen detest me, and my neighbors
fear my example: I have made myself
an exile everywhere, throughout the world,
that only Crete might offer me its shelter;
if you refuse me Crete as well, you ingrate,
and leave me here, then legend has it wrong:
Europa did not give birth to you, King Minos,
it was that tigress from Armenia,
inhospitable Syrtis! Raging Charybdis!"

"Your father was not Jove, your mother, not misled
by the counterfeit appearance of a bull!
The story of your origin is false!"

In truth, it *was* a bull that sired you!

“O father, punish me! Walls I have betrayed
so recently, take pleasure in my pain!

170

For I confess that I deserve to perish,
but by the hand of someone I have harmed;
you who have profited from our crime—
why should *you* be the one to punish it?
You should regard this crime against my father
and country as a service to your cause!

“That wife of yours is worthy, to be sure,
who tricked the fierce bull into lechery
and bore its unnatural offspring in her womb!

“Can you hear my voice? Or do the selfsame winds
that fill your sails out, you ungrateful man,
break up my words and scatter them?

180

“Now, now,

I see it is no wonder Pasiphaë
preferred the bull to you: you are much more
a savage beast than it could ever be!

“Alas for me! He orders double-speed!
The waves resound as his oars beat on them;
my land and I both disappear from view!

“It will avail you nothing to forget
what I have merited! Against your will,
I’ll overtake you, cling to your curved plow,
and be dragged through the long furrows of the sea!”

190

She’d scarcely finished speaking when she leapt
into the water and struck out for the ship,
her passion giving her the strength required.
A hateful guest now clung to the Cretan keel.

Her father, hovering on yellow wings
(for he had just been changed into an osprey),
caught sight of her and dove to the attack,
prepared to savage her with his curved beak.

200

She lost her grip in terror; as she fell,
the light air bore her up—or so it seemed,
so that she lightly skimmed above the surface.

Feathers appear upon her hands; transformed
into a bird, she is now known as *Ciris*,
and has this name from the clipped lock of hair
[because the Greek verb *kerein* means “to cut”].

Minos and Ariadne

As soon as he had disembarked on Crete,
Minos discharged his debt to Jove by slaying
a hundred bulls, then hung the spoils of war
as decorations on his palace walls.

210

The scandal of his family had grown
past all concealment; now the mother’s foul
adultery was proven by the strange
form of the Minotaur, half man, half bull.
Minos determined to remove the cause
of this opprobrium from his abode,
enclosing it within a labyrinth
devised and built by Daedalus, the most
distinguished of all living architects,
who framed confusion and seduced the eye
into a maze of wandering passages.

220

Not otherwise than when Maeander plays
his liquid games in the Phrygian fields
and flowing back and forth uncertainly,
observes its own waves bearing down on it,
and sends its doubtful waters on their ways
back to their source or down to the open sea:
so Daedalus provided numberless
confusing corridors and was himself
just barely able to find his way out,
so utterly deceitful was that place.

230

Minos confined that monstrous form within

the labyrinth, and twice it had been fed
 on the blood of sacrificed Athenians;
 after another nine-year interval,
 the third demand for tribute doomed the creature,
 when, by the aid of Princess Ariadne,
 the path back to the hidden entranceway,
 which none before had ever reached again, 240
 was rediscovered when the thread was wound;
 then Theseus abducted Minos' daughter
 and sailed to Dia, where he cruelly
 abandoned his companion to her wailing.

Bacchus brought love and comfort to the girl,
 and so that she would shine among the stars,
 he sent her diadem up into heaven;
 it flew through the thin air, and where it flew
 its precious stones were turned to brilliant fires;
 now in appearance still a crown, it's found 250
 between Ophiucus and Hercules.

Daedalus and Icarus

Meanwhile, detesting Crete and his long exile,
 and longing to return to his own nation,
 Daedalus found that an escape by sea
 was closed to him:

“Though he may bar the earth
 and seas,” he said, “without a doubt, the sky
 above is open; that is how we'll go:
 Minos rules everything except the air.”

He spoke and turned his mind to arts unknown,
 and changed the face of nature, for he placed 260
 a row of feathers in ascending order,
 smallest to largest, so you would have thought
 that they had all grown that way on a slope;
 thus antic panpipes with unequal reeds
 will rise above each other; these were bound

together in the middle with flaxen thread
 and then joined at the quills with molded wax;
 and finally, he bent them just a bit,
 so they resembled bird's wings.

Icarus,

his boy, was standing close by, unaware 270
 of any danger in the things he handled;
 he smiled as he snatched at wisps of feathers blown
 from his father's workbench by a passing breeze,
 or left a thumbprint in the golden wax
 and playfully got in his father's way.

The wondrous work continued nonetheless,
 and when he'd put the final touches to it,
 the artisan himself hung poised between
 the wings upon his shoulders in midair,
 and offered these instructions to his son: 280

“Listen to me: keep to the middle course,
 dear Icarus, for if you fly too low,
 the waves will weight your wings down with their moisture;
 and if you fly too high, flames will consume them;
 stay in the middle and don't set your course
 by gazing at the stars: ignore Boötes,
 the Dipper, and Orion's unsheathed sword;
 keep to my path and follow where I lead you.”
 And while he was instructing him in flight,
 he fit the untried wings to the boy's shoulders. 290

And as he works and as he warns the boy,
 the old man's cheeks are dampened by his tears;
 the father's hands are trembling as he gives
 his son a not-to-be-repeated kiss,
 and lifts off on his wings into the air;
 he flies ahead, afraid for his companion,
 just like a bird who leads her young in flight
 from their high nest, and as he flies along,

exhorts the boy to follow in his path,
 instructing him in their transgressive art,
 as he employs his wings in flight and watches
 his fledgling Icarus attempt his own.

300

Some fisherman whose line jerks with his catch,
 some idle shepherd leaning on his crook,
 some plowman at his plow, looks up and sees
 something astonishing, and thinks them gods,
 who have the power to pass through the air.

Now on their left, they had already passed
 the Isle of Samos, Juno's favorite,
 Delos and Paros too; and on their right,
 Lebinthos and Calymne, honey-rich,
 when the boy audaciously began to play
 and driven by desire for the sky,
 deserts his leader and seeks altitude.

310

The sun's consuming rays, much nearer now,
 soften the fragrant wax that bound his wings
 until it melts.

He agitates his arms,
 but without wings, they cannot grip the air,
 and with his father's name on them, his lips
 are taken under by the deep blue sea
 that bears his name, even to the present.

320

And his unlucky father, now no more
 a father, cries out, "Icarus, where are you,
 where, in what region, shall I look for you?"

And then he saw the feathers on the waves
 and cursed his arts; he built his son a tomb
 in the land that takes its name from Icarus.

Daedalus and Perdix

As he entombs his child's pathetic corpse,
 he is observed, from where a rank ditch drips,
 by a chatty partridge, who chirps cheerfully
 and makes his wing tips flutter in applause:

330

a novel and unprecedented bird,
 and one who'd only lately been transformed,
 O Daedalus, because of a misdeed
 that, for a long time, will be held against you.

For, as it happened, the inventor's sister,
 quite unaware of what the Fates intended,
 entrusted her own son to his instruction,
 a likely lad of twelve, who had a mind
 with the capacity for principles and precepts;
 and from his observation of the spines
 of fishes, which he'd taken as his model,
 incised a row of teeth in an iron strip
 and thereby managed to invent the saw.
 Likewise, he was the first to bind two arms
 of iron at a joint, so one is fixed
 and the other, as it moves, inscribes a circle.

340

Daedalus envied him, and headlong hurled
 this lad of precepts from a precipice,
 the steep acropolis Minerva loves,
 and lying, said the lad had slipped and fallen.

350

But Athena, who takes care of clever people,
 snatched him from harm, changed him to a bird,
 and covered him with feathers in midair.
 His former brilliance, like his former name,
 he kept, although the former was transformed
 into the swiftness of his wings and feet.

Although a bird, she does not soar aloft,
 and does not build her nest high up in trees
 or on lofty peaks; she flies close to the ground
 and lays her eggs in hedges; remembering
 that fall of long ago, she fears the heights.
 [*Perdix* is the word Greeks had for "partridge."]

360