

Whose battle-axe, one time, was raised against him.
 He turned the Tuscan sailors into dolphins.
 The lynxes draw his car, with bright reins harnessed,
 Satyrs, Bacchantes, follow, and Silenus,
 The wobbling old drunkard, totters after,
 Either on foot, with a stick to help him hobble,
 As shaky on three legs as two, or bouncing
 Out of the saddle on his wretched burro.
 Wherever Bacchus goes, the cries of women
 Hail him, and young men's joyful shouts, and drum
 And timbrels sound, and cymbals clash, and flutes
 Pipe shrill.

"Be with us, merciful and mild!"

The Theban women cry, and, crying, cherish
 The sacred rites as ordered. Only the daughters
 Of Minyas keep to themselves inside their houses
 Spoiling the holiday, spinning the wool,
 Tending the loom, keeping the servants working.
 And one of these, while plying thread and needle,
 Said: "While the others have all gone off together
 To all this what-do-you-call-it kind of service,
 Let us, who worship a better goddess, Pallas,
 Lighten our task a little by telling stories."
 They all agreed and asked her to begin.
 She knew so many stories she was doubtful
 Which to begin with: about Dercetis, maybe,
 A girl turned into a fish, all covered with scales,
 Swimming a pool near Babylon; or her daughter,
 A pure white pigeon, who lived out her days
 On the high towers; and then there was the story
 About a naiad, who, by charms and simples,
 Turned small boys into fishes, and became
 A fish herself; or how the mulberry-tree
 Changed the fruit's color from white to the deep crimson,
 From the stain of blood. This story seemed the best one,
 Not being known too well. And so she told it.

The Story of Pyramus and Thisbe

"Next door to each other, in the brick-walled city
 Built by Semiramis, lived a boy and girl,
 Pyramus, a most handsome fellow, Thisbe,
 Loveliest of all those Eastern girls. Their nearness
 Made them acquainted, and love grew, in time,
 So that they would have married, but their parents
 Forbade it. But their parents could not keep them
 From being in love: their nods and gestures showed it—
 You know how fire suppressed burns all the fiercer.
 There was a chink in the wall between the houses,
 A flaw the careless builder had never noticed,
 Nor anyone else, for many years, detected,
 But the lovers found it—love is a finder, always—
 Used it to talk through, and the loving whispers
 Went back and forth in safety. They would stand
 One on each side, listening for each other,
 Happy if each could hear the other's breathing,
 And then they would scold the wall: 'You envious barrier,
 Why get in our way? Would it be too much to ask you
 To open wide for an embrace, or even
 Permit us room to kiss in? Still, we are grateful,
 We owe you something, we admit; at least
 You let us talk together.' But their talking
 Was futile, rather; and when evening came
 They would say *Good-night!* and give the good-night kisses
 That never reached the other.

"The next morning
 Came, and the fires of night burnt out, and sunshine
 Dried the night frost, and Pyramus and Thisbe
 Met at the usual place, and first, in whispers,
 Complained, and came—high time!—to a decision.
 That night, when all was quiet, they would fool
 Their guardians, or try to, come outdoors,
 Run away from home, and even leave the city.

And, not to miss each other, as they wandered
 In the wide fields, where should they meet? At Ninus'
 Tomb, they supposed, was best; there was a tree there,
 A mulberry-tree, loaded with snow-white berries,
 Near a cool spring. The plan was good, the daylight
 Was very slow in going, but at last
 The sun went down into the waves, as always,
 And the night rose, as always, from those waters.

And Thisbe opened her door, so sly, so cunning,
 There was no creaking of the hinge, and no one
 Saw her go through the darkness, and she came,
 Veiled, to the tomb of Ninus, sat there waiting
 Under the shadow of the mulberry-tree.
 Love made her bold. But suddenly, here came something!—
 A lioness, her jaws a crimson froth
 With the blood of cows, fresh-slain, came there for water,
 And far off through the moonlight Thisbe saw her
 And ran, all scared, to hide herself in a cave,
 And dropped her veil as she ran. The lioness,
 Having quenched her thirst, came back to the woods, and saw
 The girl's light veil, and mangled it and mouthed it
 With bloody jaws. Pyramus, coming there
 Too late, saw tracks in the dust, turned pale, and paler
 Seeing the bloody veil. 'One night,' he cried,
 'Will kill two lovers, and one of them, most surely,
 Deserved a longer life. It is all my fault,
 I am the murderer, poor girl; I told you
 To come here in the night, to all this terror,
 And was not here before you, to protect you.
 Come, tear my flesh, devour my guilty body,
 Come, lions, all of you, whose lairs lie hidden
 Under this rock! I am acting like a coward,
 Praying for death.' He lifts the veil and takes it
 Into the shadow of their tree; he kisses
 The veil he knows so well, his tears run down

Into its folds: 'Drink my blood too!' he cries,
 And draws his sword, and plunges it into his body,
 And, dying, draws it out, warm from the wound.
 As he lay there on the ground, the spouting blood
 Leaped high, just as a pipe sends water spurting
 Through a small hissing opening, when broken
 With a flaw in the lead, and all the air is sprinkled.
 The fruit of the tree, from that red spray, turned crimson,
 And the roots, soaked with the blood, dyed all the berries
 The same dark hue.

"Thisbe came out of hiding,
 Still frightened, but a little fearful, also,
 To disappoint her lover. She kept looking
 Not only with her eyes, but all her heart,
 Eager to tell him of those terrible dangers,
 About her own escape. She recognized
 The place, the shape of the tree, but there was something
 Strange or peculiar in the berries' color.
 Could this be right? And then she saw a quiver
 Of limbs on bloody ground, and started backward,
 Paler than boxwood, shivering, as water
 Stirs when a little breeze ruffles the surface.
 It was not long before she knew her lover,
 And tore her hair, and beat her innocent bosom
 With her little fists, embraced the well-loved body,
 Filling the wounds with tears, and kissed the lips
 Cold in his dying. 'O my Pyramus,'
 She wept, 'What evil fortune takes you from me?
 Pyramus, answer me! Your dearest Thisbe
 Is calling you. Pyramus, listen! Lift your head!
 He heard the name of Thisbe, and he lifted
 His eyes, with the weight of death heavy upon them,
 And saw her face, and closed his eyes.

"And Thisbe
 Saw her own veil, and saw the ivory scabbard
 With no sword in it, and understood. 'Poor boy,'

She said, "So, it was your own hand,
 Your love, that took your life away. I too
 Have a brave hand for this one thing, I too
 Have love enough, and this will give me strength
 For the last wound. I will follow you in death,
 Be called the cause and comrade of your dying.
 Death was the only one could keep you from me,
 Death shall not keep you from me. Wretched parents
 Of Pyramus and Thisbe, listen to us,
 Listen to both our prayers, do not begrudge us,
 Whom death has joined, lying at last together
 In the same tomb. And you, O tree, now shading
 The body of one, and very soon to shadow
 The bodies of two, keep in remembrance always
 The sign of our death, the dark and mournful color."
 She spoke, and fitting the sword-point at her breast,
 Fell forward on the blade, still warm and reeking
 With her lover's blood. Her prayers touched the gods,
 And touched her parents, for the mulberry fruit
 Still reddens at its ripeness, and the ashes
 Rest in a common urn."

The story ended,
 There was a pause, and then another sister,
 Leuconoe, broke through the listening silence:

The Story of Mars and Venus

"The Sun sees all things first. The Sun, they say,
 Was the first one who spied on Mars and Venus
 When they were making love. The Sun, offended,
 Went with the story to her husband, Vulcan,
 Telling him all, the when, the how, the where,
 And Vulcan dropped whatever he was doing,
 And made a net, with such fine links of bronze
 No eye could see the mesh: no woolen thread
 Was ever so delicate, no spider ever
 Spun filament so frail from any rafter.

He made it so the slightest touch would bend it,
 The slightest movement make it give, and then
 He spread it over the bed, and when the lovers
 Came there again, the husband's cunning art
 Caught them and held them fast, and there they were
 Held in each other's arms, and Vulcan, lord
 Of Lemnos, opened wide the ivory doors
 And called the gods to come and see. They lay there,
 The two, in bondage, in disgrace. And some one,
 Not the least humorous of the gods in Heaven,
 Prayed that some day he might be overtaken
 By such disgrace himself. And there was laughter
 For a long time in Heaven, as the story
 Was told and told again.

The Sun-god and Leucothoe

"But Venus never
 Forgot that spy, and took her vengeance on him.
 She had her turn at getting even, spoiling
 A love affair for him, the one who spoiled
 A love affair for her. Of what avail
 Was all that beauty, brightness, radiant light?
 The god, whose fire lights all the world, was burning
 Himself with foreign fire. The god, who should have
 Looked equally on all created creatures,
 Saw nothing but one girl, Leucothoe,
 Turning on her alone the eyes, whose province
 Belonged to all the world. He would rise too early
 From the Eastern sky, would sink too late to Ocean,
 Would lengthen the winter hours by long delaying
 To look at her, sometimes would fail entirely
 Because the darkness in the heart turned outward,
 A darkness terrible to human beings.
 That was no wanness from the moon's reflection
 Between him and the earth; it was love that caused it.
 He loved Leucothoe alone: Clymene