Io now is a goddess; her enthusiasts, in linen
robes, intone their prayers to her majesty. A son,
Epaphus, was born to her—we suppose the fruit of her union
with Jupiter. In her temples are also altars to him.
When he was a young boy he had a playmate and friend,
Phaëthon, whom he sometimes teased, as boys will do.
Phaëthon, then, got huffy, put on airs, and boasted
that his sire was Phoebus Apollo. Epaphus was unimpressed:
"You believe every silly story your mother tells you? You think
that you are the son of the Sun? Tell me another!" His playmate,
purple with rage, ran home to Clymene, his mama, to say
what the other boy had said, and ask what he could have
answered.
Ashamed, insulted, he wanted proof of his noble birth,
something both for himself and to flaunt in the other's face.
"Prove it!" he said, and threw his arms around his mother's
neck. In the name of all that is holy, he begged her to make it
better, make the pain go away. And the mother heard him,
was moved by the boy's distress, and perhaps as well by the insult
to her own person. She stretched her arms up toward the sky
and invoked the Sun: "Hear me, my child. In all his glory,
your father looks down upon us. By his splendor, I swear
that you are his truly begotten son, that fiery orb
you see crossing the sky each day and whose heat enlivens
and enables the world and orders our days and nights is indeed
your sire. Believe me, my darling! For if I do not speak truth,
I pray that I never again may behold the light of the world,
which is his alone." She looked down at her son, in whose
small face
some embers of doubt still guttered. "Do you need further proof?
You are welcome to seek it from him. Go to your father's house
and ask him yourself. The place where he rises is easy to find.
If you are disposed to do so, go," she says and smiles
to see him smile. Indeed, he's beside himself with excitement
and joy. He leaps up, imagines the heavens, and instantly sees
himself striding across the sky. He has heard her words.
Forthwith he sets out eastward to make his father's acquaintance
trekking across the expanses of Ethiopian grassland
and reaching at last the Indus Valley, which lies adjacent
to the place where his father, the Sun, commences his daily round.

BOOK II

The great hall of the Sun is lofty with sweeping columns
and bright with shining gold and bronze polished like fire.
The pediments are paneled in ivory; the portals
are silver buffed to a high sheen. Everywhere you look,
the craft is splendid and rarer than any precious metal
or gemstone. Consider the doors with their intricate bas-reliefs,
Vulcan's work, a map that shows the ocean surrounding
the island of earth, that holy circle above which a column
of cloud rises to heaven. In the sea are the gloomy masters
of waves and the great tides—Triton, who sings his chanteys;
the sly chameleon, Proteus; burly Aegaeon, whose arms
can wrestle the greatest whales; and Doris and all her fifty
nereid daughters who swim, or bask on the rocks and comb
their long green hair, or joy-ride on porpoises' backs or
dolphins'—
and each had a distinct and recognizable face,
although you could tell they were sisters. In the representation
of land,
there are cities, fields, flora and fauna, men and beasts,
as well as the demigods who rule over rivers. Above
in the sky are the planets and stars, with all the constellations
of the zodiac represented, six on each of the doors.
The approachway is steep, and Phaëthon climbed its
imposing height
boldly until he reached the house of the Sun—his father's
house, if what he'd been told was true. He entered the hall
and beheld at last his father's face, although at some distance
for the radiance was all but blinding. Decked in a robe
of imperial purple, the great god Phoebus sat on his throne
that shone with precious emeralds. To left and right were
attendants—
Day, Month, Year, and Century. Hours hurried
this way and that on their endless tasks while the statelier Seasons

conversed among themselves: Spring in her diadem
of blossoms; Summer with sprigs of grain as her emblem; Fall
gay with her splotches of trodden grape juice; and chilly Winter
with tousles of long white hair and a cascade of matching
whiskers.
From the center of this, the Sun, with dazzling eyes that see
at once into every soul, beheld the terrified youth
who stood there gawking at all this majesty. "My son,"
he said, reassuring the lad with his first words, "you are welcome,
but tell me what brings you here to my dwelling place. Whatever
is in your heart, confide in me. Speak, Phaëthon, to your father."
"O light of the world," he answered, "if only you will allow me
so to address you, I come to hear you acknowledge me
and let me have some proof that you indeed are my sire.
Reassure my troubled mind and let me know
the story my mother has told me, however far-fetched, is
the god's
truth." His father removed his radiant crown and invited
the youngster to come closer, embraced him, and then said:
"You are, indeed, my son. Clymene has spoken the truth.
And to give you the proof you ask for, let me grant you a favor—
whatever you ask shall be yours. I take my solemn oath
by the Styx on this—or whatever the gods swear on, for I
have never myself beheld that fabulous watercourse.
Ask, and it shall be given." The son requested his father's
car, that splendid chariot, and the right to drive his amazing
team of wingèd horses, if only for one day.
The father, sorry he'd made such a promise and sworn the oath,
shook his radiant head three times and a fourth and said:
"Your words have demonstrated that mine were vain and foolish.
I cannot retract my promise, but I ask you to name another,
any other favor in all the world. What you here
request is ruinous, mad. You have not the strength and skill.
A mortal, you want more than even the gods themselves
would dare imagine. None but myself has the mettle to drive
those fiery steeds. Consider the words of a loving father
who wishes you well. Not even the god of thunder, lord
of all the gods, would presume to take those reins in his hands.
Understand what I say. The road at first is steep, and the horses,
strong as they are and fresh at the start of the day's journey,
can barely make their way as we mount into the sky.
Then, when it levels off, the course is so high that one looks
down at the mountaintops and glittering seas and feels

giddy. I do it daily but never without some fear
when my heart quakes and the backs of my knees begin to quiver.
But the last part is the hardest, the sudden and steep descent.
One takes one's life in one's hands along with the heavy reins.
I come down to meet with Tethys, who receives me into her
waters
and every day is worried lest I overturn and fall
headlong into the sea. And all this time, the heavens
are spinning, whirling in constant motion that carries along
everything in the skies except myself and my car.
Only I can maintain a contrary motion against
the tide of time itself. Suppose you took my place.
Would you stand there and endure the dizzying spin of the world?
If I can barely survive its buffets, would it not sweep
you away altogether? And why would you want such a thing?
Do you imagine pleasant vistas? Attractive sights
upon which you may gaze in the course of your journey? It is
nothing at all
like that, no groves of trees, no temples, no charming prospect
of cheerful exotics offering interesting gifts and mementos,
but a rough track in a dark jungle where fierce beasts
of prey are lurking—the raging bull, the hungry lion,
the pinching crab, and the scorpion with deadly poisonous barb.
The horses are not what anyone would think of as tame; they
breathe
flame from their mouths and nostrils as their huge muscular necks
fight against the restraints of harness and reins. I cannot
change my mind or retract, but you can withdraw your request
and make another and better. You ask for a fatal gift.
If I were not truly your father, why would I speak to you so
with a parent's concern and love? Look at my face, in my heart
that breaks to think of his child and how the world's rich gifts
may never be yours. The treasures of earth and sea and sky
are there for the taking. Only this one thing, I implore you
not to ask. It's a gift more like a curse if only
you understood what's in store should you hold me to my
promise."
The young man heard his father's words, but did not hear
them,
paid no heed, and insisted on what the god had sworn to.
He wanted to drive that fiery car. Slowly, with dread,
the father led his son to the chariot Vulcan had made
for him with its gorgeous golden axle and intricate golden

wagon tongue. Its wheels had tire hoops of gold
and silver spokes. The horses' yoke, thickly set with jewels
and chrysolites, reflected the radiance of their driver.
Phaëthon gazed in wonder at the splendor of this machine,
as in the East Aurora threw open her purple gates,
and the stars faded away in a slowly brightening sky,
with the morning star the last to quit its celestial watch post.

The Sun god saw the dwindling horns of the Moon tumble
down from view and ordered the Hours to yoke the horses.
This the goddesses did and led the steeds from their stalls
snorting smoke and flame. They buckled the bridles on
and harnesses. Then, with a magic ointment, the father anointed
the face of his son to protect it from searing in those hot flames.
Then, despite himself and with soul-wracking sighs, he placed
the dazzling diadem on the youngster's head and said:
"At least, take my advice and profit from what I have learned.
Never use the whip, but take it slow and steady,
keeping as tight a rein as you can on these spirited creatures.
They'll give you a lively enough ride, I warrant. Your course
is slantwise through the zones of the heavens, or more like an arc
that never extends as far as the northern or southern extremes.
Follow the tracks you'll see that the wheels have already marked
and try not to go too high, which would set the skies on fire,
but neither dip down too low, for that would ignite the earth.
Keep to the middle, and try not to swerve too much to the right,
where the Serpent is, or the left, where heaven's altar lies
so low in the skies. Fortune perhaps may come to your aid
in this foolhardy business. Do not compound your folly
but keep your wits about you. Night has come to its end,
and it's time. The dawn is here, chasing the last shadows.
Are you sure you want to do this? Take my advice and love
instead of this mad ride. You stand here on firm earth,
and nothing compels you to climb up into that terrible car.
Spare yourself and me. Let me do what I do
everyday, bringing light for you and the world to bask in."

But Phaëthon wouldn't listen. He had already ascended
and gathered the reins into his eager hands. He stood
proudly as if he were posing, waved a cheerful salute
to his smiling, heartbroken sire to thank him for this great gift.

The team, whinnying, restless, was pawing the earth,
impatient
to go, go. . . . The four, Pyroïs, Eoüs, Aethon,
and Phlegon, charged the air with their wild animal spirits.

When Tethys, the great sea goddess who had borne Clymene,
opened
the gates wide as she'd done a thousand times before,
she had no idea her grandson was standing there in the car.
The horses charged together, with a thunder of hoofs and a
flashing
that glazed the clouds in their path. The chariot rose up into
the air, overtaking and then passing East Wind and rising
higher and faster. The horses could feel the weight of the car
but less than on other days. As ships on the sea will skitter
without their usual ballast, yawing and rolling, the Sun's
chariot bounces along, unstable, a bobbling plaything
of physics' slightest impulse, as if there were no one driving.
Given thus their heads, the horses enjoy themselves,
romp, run free, frisk, and break to unfamiliar
regions that always tempted on all their unvarying journeys
before. The young man is now in the grip of panic; his will
has fled, as he would have liked to do himself, but he cannot
dismount, cannot escape. The reins hang slack in his hands.
He has no idea where he is, where he wants to go, where he wants
not to go. The constellations are roused. The Great
and Lesser Bears that had dozed in the cold awake and try
to cool off in the sea. The Serpent, which stretches in polar
skies, is warmed and writhes into life. Even the clumsy
Boötes in his lumbering oxcart is startled and flees
in a haste that would have been funny to see, but Phaëthon's eyes,
elsewhere, are wide with fright as he sees how far below now
earth's mountains and valleys lie. His knees are weak
with the knowledge that he will fall. Blinded in all that light,
all he can see now is his huge and dazzling wrongness,
his folly and pride, his repentance that he ever came anywhere
near
this infamous team of horses, this dreadful vehicle. Crazed
and desperate now, he wishes he never asked his father's
name and fame. His mother might better have told him Merops
had been his sire, that father whose sons refused to listen
to the good advice he gave them—and then Diomedes killed
them.
Death is clearly his lot. He looks behind at the empty
space he has already traveled, and then ahead at the larger
distance yet to go. In dismay. It is simply hopeless,
as, when a ship is abandoned, or the pilot is washed away
and the useless rudder wavers purposelessly in the sea,

there is not even the hope that the gods may playfully nudge it
to safety or hearken to desperate prayers of those yet on board.
He would call out to the horses but cannot remember their names,
and to left and right he can see the menacing beasts of the heavens.
There, Scorpio flexes his barbed tail to strike
as any scorpion would, but huge, blotting out the sky,
and the tip of the barb shines with the deadly venom the creature
exudes—and the very sight of it paralyzes the youth.
His wits are dulled, his will drains, and the reins fall
from insensate hands. The horses, feeling their freedom, exult
and, with nothing to check their fervor, run wild into the strange
quarters of air they have always eyed on their ordered rounds.
Wherever their whim prompts, they rush now in a transport,
rattling over the smaller stars and careening madly,
the axle bouncing, the wheels erratically showering sparks
as they climb higher, higher, then wheel and plunge down again.
The Moon watches in wonder as her brother's chariot scorches
clouds and thunderheads, and the earth bursts into flame,
the crests of the mountains first, and then, as the moisture
of rocks
comes to a sudden boil, in loud, random explosions.
Trees are consumed, and grain in an instant ripens to ash.
Try to imagine entire cities consumed in a moment,
the nightmare of whole nations flashing, charring, gone.
The woodland is burning, and mountains are smoldering logs in
a huge
hearth that is the world—Athos, Taurus, and Tmolus.
Oeta goes, and Ida, her springs gone dry, is burning.
Helicon now is ablaze, and Haemus burns like Aetna,
which is double bright and doubly ruined. Parnassus is gone,
and Eryx, Cynthus, and Othrys. The snows of Rhodope melt
and boil away. Mimas and Dindyma go, and sacred
Cithaeron liquefies into fire. The distant Scythian
ranges smolder and blaze, the Caucasus lie beneath
a thick pall. The craggy Alps and the cloud-shrouded
Appennines go. Ossa, Pindus, and even mighty
Olympus are burning. He looks at the general conflagration
and feels the heat of the air searing his lungs. His car
is a furnace now. The floor is hot beneath his feet,
and the smoke and sparks are a dreadful whirl on all sides as
heaven
turns into hell, and the horses are running faster than ever,
although they can't see either. Phaëthon's eyeballs fry,

and his lids are all but seared together, but, could he open
his eyes, it would do no good in the choking soot and smoke.
It was then that the Ethiopians, up until then like us,
were blackened by the intense heat, and Libya turned
from a garden spot to the desert we see there now as her rivers
and lakes were boiled away. The nymphs of our springs and pools
tore their hair, bereft, as Dirce dried up in Boeotia;
in Argos, Amymone no longer bubbled up and sang;
the Pirenian spring in Corinth gave out. And the world's great
rivers
shrank in their beds and died, the Don, Peneus, Caïcus,
and quick Ismenus . . . gone. The Eremanthus and Xanthus
disappeared, and muddy Lycormas, and crooked Maeander,
which lolls and writhes in its plain. The Melas and the Eurotas,
Euphrates, Orontes, and Thermodon, the muddy Ganges, the
Phasis,
the Danube, and Alph the sacred river . . . all of them vanished.
The Sperchios' banks are burning, and the wide Tagus dries up
in distant Lusitania. Water birds, serene
on the Cayster's gentle waters out in Maeonia, poach
as if the lake had turned of a sudden into a great
bain-marie. The seven mouths of the Nile choke
with dust and die. In Thrace, the Hebrus as well as the Strymon
dry up and disappear. The Rhine, the Po, the Tiber
are nothing but empty ditches in a world that cracks and yawns
as ghastly chasms gape and the bright light of the fire
cuts through the underworld's habitual murk to frighten
Pluto, his consort, and all their kingdom of shadowy wraiths.
The ocean itself, enraged, skulked off to leave behind it
an enormous desolation of cooked fish in the baking
mud. There were brand-new islands, hitherto submerged
but now towering high in the nightmare landscape, mountains
where the only game was the upturned bellies of dead dolphins.
Nereus and Doris, who had lived in the blue Aegean,
perspired in their cave, and all their fifty daughters,
who had sung and danced in the sea in choruses around them,
shrieked in fear and pain. Neptune, himself, was roused
to defend his kingdom and came three times to the surface to raise
his arms against this threat, but each time turned away,
unable to bear the heat of the air that was now on fire.
Earth, having nowhere to hide, felt how her streams were
dying
and turned her scorched face to the skies in pain to complain,

raising her hand to shield her eyes so mountains trembled.
In broken and piteous tones, she implored the celestial gods:
"If it be your will that I should perish thus, I demand
to know what I have done. And why, if I am fated
to die, o king of the heavens, should it not be by your own
hand? What lesser fire than yours should burn me so?
I suffer, but let me know the justice of my fate.
Make manifest the true necessity for this dreadful
end! If I must perish, enfold me in your wisdom
and stern love. . . ." She coughed, choked, begged the pardon
of the august gods, and continued: "See how my hair is burning.
Ashes are hot in my eyes and stinging my face and shoulders!
Is this my proper reward for the good service I've done,
bearing the wounds of the curved plow and the sharp pick,
pestered from season to season, and always abundantly giving?
Those creatures you have entrusted to me I nurtured, providing
food for them and their beasts. For their sacred rites, I supplied
incense with which they offered thanks to the high gods.
But even if somehow, without having known it, I have sinned,
what has my brother Ocean done to deserve your wrath?
His waters recoil, his third of the universe bubbles and shrinks
from an angry sky and its searing flames. The heavens themselves
smoke and smolder. Have pity, if not on land and sea,
at least on the sky, where you yourselves live in lofty splendor.
From pole to pole there are nothing but arcs of billowing fire.
Your sacred dwelling places cannot be safe for long.
Atlas can scarcely endure the heat of the weight he carries
and shudders in pain. If earth and sea and sky all go,
chaos will come again in all its incoherence,
supplanting the orderly cosmos that deserved your pity and care."

So Earth spoke and, exhausted and agonized, fell silent,
retreating into herself as far as the borderlands
of the world of shadows. But Jove has heard her plaintive cry,
and the mighty father summons the other gods to witness,
and especially him who had given the fiery car into
the care of another, that unless he exert himself and offer
urgent help, all life would perish in this disaster.
Jupiter then ascends to the parapet of heaven,
from which he covers the earth with clouds, hurls thunderbolts,
and sends down rains from the skies. But nothing is there at hand.
There are no clouds to spread, nor rains with which to shower
the burning everywhere below. He takes a bolt
of lightning, hefts it high beside his ear, and hurls it

down with precise aim to that charioteer in the air,
fighting fire with fire. The horses, maddened further,
rend their traces and scatter. The chariot, now careening
crazily, wrecks, its axle broken, its wheels destroyed,
their spokes flying in all directions, while Phaëthon,
his hair ablaze, is thrown free, plummets down through the air,
leaving a neat contrail of fire and smoke behind him.
As a shooting star that seems sometimes to fall from a clear
sky and makes its momentary punctuation,
so Phaëthon fell, and fell, and landed at last,
far from his native place, in the river Eridanus,
which received his broken corpse and bathed the ruined face.
The nymphs thereupon performed the solemn rites of interment
for the charred flesh, which was all that remained of the
handsome lad
after the thunderbolt's devastation. They carved on a stone
an epitaph to mark the site and note the life:
IN · THIS · PLACE · PHAËTHON · LIES · WHO · ROSE · IN · HIS · FATHER'S · CAR
WITH · A · DARING · BEYOND · HIS · STRENGTH · OR · WISDOM—
AND · FELL · FAR.
That father, stricken, grieving, covered his face and wept,
and, if we believe the stories we have heard passed down from
those times,
there was once an entire day when the Sun never appeared,
and the only light was the garish glare from those still burning
fields and woods. In that dreadful dreamscape, sooty and rank,
Clymene wandered, mute with woe, her clothing torn
where the woman had plucked and rent it, in search of her
son's body.
At length she reached the banks of that river in Italy, found
the tomb, and fell on the ground to weep and kiss the stone
and hug it to her breasts. Joining her now, her daughters,
the Heliades, pour out their bitter lamentations
at their brother's death and what it implies—the limitation
each of us must learn for himself on what a man
may dare to dream. The world is different now, and smaller,
hardly worth their notice. They stay there by the tomb
days and weeks on end. Months, and they have not moved,
and then one day the eldest, Phaëthusa, complains
her feet are cold and heavy. Lampetia, her sister, comes—
or tries to—but she, too, is held fast now. Her toes
have rooted into the ground. A third, seeing this awful
thing that has now afflicted her sisters, raises her hands

to tear her hair in grief and anger, but finds there leaves
growing out of her head. Another looks down at legs
that are turning wooden, at arms that are twisting into branches.
Bark closes around their slender waists, their breasts,
loins, shoulders, and necks . . . but their lips, still lips, cry out
to a mother who runs to them, frantic and quite unable to help.
All she can do is kiss those not yet transformed lips. . . .
But what is the good of that? She tries to tear off their bark,
to break the twigs from their fingers, but her daughters cry out in pain
as each one feels the wounds her unwitting mother inflicts:
"Don't! Mother, it hurts me. Please! You are tearing my body,
which still, within this tree, feels all the pains of the flesh.
Mother, mother, farewell. . . ." And the bark closed over the speech
to leave a roughened and silent loss in the air. And tears,
for the tears of the girls still flowed for their poor brother, their mother,
and for themselves now, too. Those tears hardened to amber
as the Sun glanced down at his daughters, who were changed then to a grove
of miraculous weeping trees. The amber glistened and hardened
into the jewels the pretty brides of Rome now wear.

Their cousin Cygnus, who'd come to mourn at Phaëthon's grave,
saw this miraculous change and, there at the banks of the river,
gave himself over to keening and lamentation, for pain
is contagious, engendering pain, as we see in the plight of one
the sorry condition of all. His wailing was high, shrill
and higher still, and his hair turned white and fluffed to feathers.
His neck stretched and thinned, and his reddened fingers grew
webs. His arms were increasingly alar, and his mouth
decidedly beakish. Thus did Cygnus turn into a new
bird: the swan, which dislikes the upper air, where Jove
makes free with his thunderbolts, and prefers the lakes' and ponds'
cool water, which is fire's complement and foe.

Apollo, meanwhile, huddles in deep mourning, his light
cloaked as if eclipsed by grief. He hates himself
and the world he once illumined. In sorrow and anger he sulks,
refusing to do service to a world he now despises.
"Weary, sick of it all, I am done. Let anyone else
who dares attempt my route and drive my damnable cart

across the sky. If no one volunteers, so be it.
Let all the gods confess the task is beyond their strength.
Let Jupiter try it himself, and while he fights those beasts
and tries to hold the reins, let him forswear those weapons
that undo foolish sons and destroy innocent fathers.
When he has tried it himself and failed, let him know the boy
did his best and therefore did not deserve to die."

The other gods surround him and plead for him to restore
the light of the world. Jove, himself, apologizes—
gruffly, but that is the way of the mighty Lord of Heaven.
Phoebus rounds up the team, yokes them, trembling still,
into the chariot's harness, and with fierce strokes of the whip
lashes the wild and hateful beasts that killed his boy.

Now the mighty Father, making his rounds of the walls
of heaven, inspects the fortifications and checks the damage
the fire has done, but the splendid muniments stand firm.
He then descends to earth to assess the damage and see
how what remains of mankind is faring, with special attention
to the Arcadian lands he loves. Her springs and rivers that languish,
he brings again to life. He restores grass to her fields,
outfits her trees again with their proper raiment of green
leaves, and repairs the devastation of woods and forests.
Occupied thus in this work—involved, engaged—he encounters
quite by chance a certain nymph and, as it happens,
is in an instant struck to his very marrow, her beauty
impossible to behold and not to have. She was
Callisto, lovely indeed, but hardly a flirt or coquette,
not at all a girl who devoted whatever attention
she had to her coiffure. Her severe gown was held
by a plain pin, and her hair tied back with a simple hank
of utilitarian ribbon. She was one of Diana's women,
with a spear and bow in her hands. Nowhere on all Maenalus'
slopes was there any nymph the goddess loved any better.
But even that turned out to be not enough. The Sun
was high in the sky when the maiden entered a grove of ancient
trees to lie down and rest. She unstrung her bow and stretched out
on a grassy knoll, her quiver doubling there as her pillow.
Jove, beside himself with eagerness and delight,
smiled as he guessed that his wife might never find out—and then,
on second and more realistic thought, reflected that this
would be well worth the price he'd have to pay if she did.