to his ivory figure, chats with it, brings it occasional presents,
flowers, necklaces, rings. He kisses its lips and caresses
its elegant limbs, and he feels his fingers sink into yielding
flesh. . . . He's afraid he's bruised it. But no, nothing. A perfect
surface remains, aloof and indifferent. He sues with more ardor,
dresses it up in robes of expensive stuff, or bedecks it
with jewels. Sometimes he stretches it out on a couch to let it
loll like an odalisque on a pillow, as if it were sleeping,
as if it enjoyed his wooing but just now were feeling fatigued.
"The midsummer eve had arrived with its celebration of
Venus.
Heifers with gilded horns ambled their way toward the altars
and the fine-honed axe. The smoke of incense curled in the air.
Pygmalion went to the temple to make his sacred donation
and ask, as was the custom, for the goddess to grant him a favor.
He could hardly speak, knowing that what he wanted was crazy,
foolish, absurd, and yet there was nothing else he cared for.
He started, 'Gracious goddess, grant me a woman to wed
who is . . .' How could he ask for the statue to quicken with life?
He settled
on '. . . *like* my statue.' But Venus knew well what he was
thinking
and, pleased with his modest prayer, gave him auspicious signs
with the tongues of fire leaping three times high in the air.
The artist was puzzled, afraid she was teasing him, had no way
to read the divine response. Eager, anxious, afraid,
he went back home to the image he'd made, and touched it,
kissed it.
Warm, was it? He couldn't allow himself to believe this.
He kissed her again. He touched with a diffident hand her breast,
the hardness of which he could feel as yielding, like wax that
softens
whenever you work it and takes what shape you choose to
impose.
Torn between hope and fear, he touches the statue again,
and cannot believe it is flesh, warm and with arteries pulsing
blood and life. . . . Astounding! He gives his thanks to the
goddess
and tenderly kisses the lips of the maiden to bring her awake.
She blinks, blushes, opens her eyes, and gazes upon him,
her maker, her lover, her man, and behind him the light of
the sky,
for which she is grateful to him and the goddess. Venus presides

at this marriage she has contrived and enabled. Nine months
elapse,
and a daughter is born to them, Paphos, for whom that island is
named.
"Cinyras was the son of Paphos, and, had he died
without any issue, he might have had reason to offer thanks,
for his daughter was Myrrha, and hers is a truly terrible story
to make every father tremble and every daughter afraid.
Some there will be who would rather disbelieve that such things
can ever happen, or else they admit that in backward regions
remote and exotic tribesmen may behave in this way, but it doesn't
count or affect anyone we'd know. Does the human species
vary so much? Is there ever safety anywhere? Distance
doesn't prevent those oddly dressed people from sending us
spices—
cinnamon, balsam, mace, and frankincense, which their trees
exude, and their odors pervade our houses here. And myrrh . . .
do not forget the myrrh, rare and grievously costly.
That tree was once a young woman, who fell in love. But Cupid
denies that he ever touched her, blaming instead a Fury
who came from the depths of the Styx with a torch to singe
her soul
and drive her to actions of crime or madness to make us shudder.
There have been girls who have hated their fathers, and this is
wrong,
but how much greater a wrong is the love that Myrrha felt
for her sire? Suitors, noble and rich, appeared at her door,
princes of many neighboring countries and faraway kingdoms.
She spurned them all, though she gave no reason, denying there
was one,
unable herself to face it, or else she still struggled against it,
for she knew perfectly well that this was forbidden, was wicked.
This was what animals do, and humans ought to behave
in a better and different way. A heifer will stand and allow
her own father to mount her. Or a goat will mate with the same
billy that sired her. Horses do this, and birds. . . . But people
have standards, a civilization's pieties, laws, and customs
by which we are meant to govern our passions and our behavior.
On the other hand, any reasoned argument must allow
an answer, a contrary case, which she's hardly loath to
construct—
that these beasts are fortunate, graced, have not allowed artificial
constraints to veto the promptings of their spontaneous feelings

and natural inclinations. Man, with his civilized rules,
departs from the natural order, violates and defiles it.
But not all men, for there surely are primitive tribes somewhere
with bones in their noses, plates in their lips, and elongated necks
stretched out with coils of metal. Who knows how they behave?
Fathers may mate with daughters in the dark of their conical
huts . . .
with what result? That the bonds of love that already connect
them
are strengthened, doubled, perfected. Why can she not have
been born
there in that happy tribe, where there isn't a word for 'sin,'
and they do as they please? Or here, if only she weren't his
daughter,
then she could come as a stranger to Cinyras and be closer
than what was allowed to a daughter, an intimate whose nearness
is only a torment. She thinks of that blessed lack of connection,
which beckons. Yes, she will leave, go far away. It will hurt
less if she does not see him every day. It will keep her
from dwelling upon this madness. The only intelligent course,
it nevertheless would deprive her of what she can now enjoy,
the chance to see him, touch him, talk with him, even kiss him,
as daughters so often may do. And what more does she imagine
is ever likely to happen? Can't she accept this much
and be content? Would she truly think to supplant her own
mother
in Cinyras' bed and heart? Would she bear him a child and be
mother
and sister at once? She thinks of those other older sisters
with snakes in their horrible hair who confront sinners with
smoking
torches. She can imagine them turning on her, knowing well
where her sordid thoughts have been tending all this time, in fear
but in fascination, too. Her father, hardly a sinner,
must save them both, must resist her vile and forbidden passion.
"Thus, in torment and all alone, she considered the question.
Her father, meanwhile, inquired which of her many suitors
she might perhaps prefer. He named them over and watched
her averted face for some sign of animation or interest
or even attention. Nothing but silence and brimming tears,
which Cinyras supposed were owing to maidenly fears
all girls go through. He dried her tears and kissed her lips.

Myrrha brightened at once. He asked her what sort of a man
she'd thought of as a husband. 'One just like you,' she replied.
Failing to understand what she meant, he was pleased, delighted,
and kissed her again as she blushed in pleasure, shame, and
confusion.
"That night she could not sleep but tossed in her bed,
consumed
by her passion's flames, despair, renewed desire, and fear,
which warred in her heart. A tree that woodsmen have cut with
their axes
wavers thus at the whims of the winds, leans this way and that,
will fall, but in which direction? Nobody can predict.
She thinks, herself, of the only escape she can even imagine—
death itself, which appears as her least unattractive option.
She rises and walks like a zombie, as if she were only rehearsing
or reenacting her death. She flings her sash round a beam,
ties a knot, and recites, as if from a script, 'Farewell,
my beloved Cinyras. For you, for us both, I die.'
She has fashioned the noose and draped it around her neck, when
her nurse
appears in the nick of time to save her, to keep her darling
from doing this dreadful thing. She screams, grabs at the noose,
and snatches it off the head of the girl she has loved and protected
for so many years. She weeps. They weep together, embrace,
and the nurse asks the poor girl to say what drove her to do this.
Myrrha stares at the ground, sorry that she has been saved,
and the nurse holds her, enfolds her in dear, scrawny old arms,
strokes her hair and rocks her, croons to her, and begs her
in the name of their years of love to confide in her. But the girl
groans and turns away. The frantic old woman clutches
a hand to her sagging bosom, which once gave suck to this
nursling
she still loves and would give what is left of her life to protect.
'What is it you want? I'll help you, whatever it is,' she assures
the silent young woman. 'The old are not altogether helpless
but know the secrets of herbs, philters, and powerful charms.
Has someone bewitched you? Spells may be broken, unsaid,
undone. . . .
Or have you crossed some god? Still, you may look to appease
by sacrifices and prayers even the heaven's anger.
What else can it be? Your mother and father are well, and the
household

prospers. . . .' And there the girl, hearing her father mentioned,
sighed from the depths of her suffering soul. The old woman
noticed
and, though she failed to connect the sigh with its object, guessed
that love was somehow the trouble, the source of her darling's
pain.
Of course, with that train of suitors! She took the girl in her arms
and said, 'I know. It is love. It must be love. And I'll help you.
Whatever it is, whatever you want, I can be of service,
smoothing the way. You must trust me. Your father will never
know. . . .'
The girl broke away. The nurse's words had touched a nerve
that renewed her exquisite pain. 'Go away,' she said, and sobbed.
'Don't ask questions; just go. What I want is unspeakably evil.
You don't want to know.' In horror and grief, the old woman
kneels
before the young girl and begs her to trust, to confide, to share
her terrible burden. She even threatens to tell what she's seen,
to go to the master with word of this suicide business. The choice
is that or accepting the help and advice of her loving *nounou*.
The girl raises the kneeling woman before her, embraces
and kisses her, weeping copious tears that dampen both
their blouses. She attempts to confess, begins, then halts,
then begins again, but cannot go on. She hides her face
in the sleeve of her robe. Once more she attempts it, stammers,
'My mother's . . .
my father's . . . my father . . .' She gives up, as words give way to
her groans.
But the nurse, cold with the shock of what she has guessed, is
certain
of what possesses the girl. Disaster! Is there advice,
except to forget this, deny these awful promptings, suppress
these ruinous thoughts? The girl nods her head in agreement,
for this was her own view, too, and the noose was her way to
achieve
this otherwise unattainable goal. And her death remains
a way to escape from the other and much worse fate. The nurse
feels the hairs at the nape of her neck prickle in fear
as she tells the girl, 'Live, then, and I shall help you have
him. . . .'
She cannot say his name but swears by all the gods
she will do whatever is needed to satisfy her desire.

"The feast of Ceres, this was, when matrons would offer
wheat sheaves
to thank the bountiful goddess with the first yield of the harvest.
For this sacred rite, they put on the white robes of the vestals
and lived for nine days and nights as those celibate priestesses do,
keeping themselves from their husbands, among these women,
Cenchreïs,
Myrrha's mother and Cinyras' pious wife. The king,
therefore, went alone to his bed each night, and the nurse,
shrewd and alert, chose her moment. He had been drinking that
night,
was muddled and feeling lonely, and likely—as any man can be—
to listen to her suggestive report that a pretty girl
adored him, loved him, and wanted to visit his bedroom.
Could she?
'Attractive?' 'Yes, and young.' 'How young?' 'Your daughter's
age.'
He smiled at this and nodded assent. The nurse hurried off
to report this triumph to Myrrha, who received it with some
mixed feelings,
delight and dread that her fate had presented itself. She was ready.
"In the small hours of night when all was still in the palace,
when the moon had fled from the sky and the stars were
concealing themselves
in a shroud of cloud, she set out for her father's apartment,
stumbled,
recognized that the omen was baleful, but nevertheless
continued along the hallway, as one does in dreams or nightmares,
unable to turn back now. She froze in her tracks as she heard
the warning cry of a screech owl, which sounded again and
again—
a treble caution confirming her worst fears. She continued
down the corridor, clutching her nurse's arm for support.
The hall is apparently endless, but then—too soon—they arrive
at the door the nurse pushes open. The girl's knees flutter and
tremble.
Her body shudders as much in fear as desire. Her breath
is caught in her throat's constriction. Her resolve has abandoned
her now,
and she would turn back if her nurse were not propelling her
forward
toward the looming hulk of the huge bed in that darkened room.

The woman takes her hand, puts it in Cinyras' hand,
whispers, 'Take her. The girl is yours,' and scuttles away,
leaving the doomed couple in the dark together to do
whatever they would. Unknowing, the father takes the daughter.
His flesh cleaves to his own flesh. To calm her fears
he tells her all will be well and calls her 'Child.' In reply,
she calls him 'Daddy,' as if to confirm their mutual guilt.
"Full of her father's seed, the girl slips out of the room,
guilty but shameless—there's nothing to fear or to hope for now.
The next night, she returns, because twice is no worse than once.
And the third night, she is back yet again, but this time her father,
wondering who she is and what she looks like, lights
a lamp, which reveals the dismaying truth. He is speechless,
appalled
to see what he's done, what they've done. In grief and anger, he
grabs
his sword from its sheath, which it hangs on the wall nearby, to
punish
this unnatural child, but she flees and escapes into the darkness,
out of the room, the house, the city, and into remote
and exotic lands, even as far away as the Arab
wilderness, where she rests herself and her womb's great burden.
Exhausted now and indifferent, she doesn't know what to
pray for,
and cannot even imagine a welcome among the living
or among the dreaded dead. What she has done and been
and what she is now is hateful. 'Gods,' she invokes, defiant,
'I accept my punishment gladly, whatever it is. I offend
the light and defile the darkness. I pray you, therefore, change me,
make me something else, transform me entirely, cleanse me. . . .'
There must have been some god who heard her desperate petition
and granted her prayer, for the earth now covered her feet, and
her toes
were rooting into the soil to support the trunk of her body,
which stiffened as flesh and bone transformed themselves
into wood,
blood became sap that flowed up and into her branching arms,
and skin became bark. Within her, under the wood, in her womb,
a restless fetus moved, and the tree could feel it and grieve
at the ruin of those fresh hopes that a baby's birth should imply.
Tears flowed from the tree, miraculous fragrant tears
of what we know as myrrh. Her name, surviving, preserves
from age to age her singular story, her singular grief.

"And what of the child within her, that poor and ill-
conceived
half brother and son? He seeks a passage into the light,
a way to be born and live. The tree is swollen, contorted,
and, although it cannot call out, it appears to writhe in its pain.
Lucina pities its tears and the plaintive sound of the wind
in its groaning branches. She touches the wood with gentle hands
while reciting charms that assist mothers in labor. The tree
cracks open, the bark splits, and the baby boy is born.
His cry startles the silent woods, and naiads come
to swaddle the infant in leaves and wash his body in soothing
myrrh. Envy herself would praise his perfection. He looks
like one of those putti painters do in their pictures' borders
to suggest the ideals of love, of innocent beauty—whatever
is just out of reach, for which we strive, and of which we dream,
and, much to our shame, we fail to achieve and betray or forget.
" Years pass, and the baby grows in size and strength
but remains an extraordinarily beautiful child. He looks
like Cupid except for that quiver of arrows the mischievous god
carries. He turns from boy to youth, and is handsome still,
an example of how we all should like to look, if we dared
imagine such perfection. Venus herself looks down
and is struck by the young man, utterly stunned. Some suppose
the goddess was wounded and make up a story of how her own
child
Cupid, whom she once embraced as mothers do,
unwittingly grazed her breast with one of his magic arrows.
She is hardly aware of the superficial abrasion, a mere
scratch, but it has its effect. Her mind's balance is ruined,
and she finds herself indifferent to her old pastimes and haunts.
Cythera is dreary now, and Paphos only another
island out in the sea. And Cnidos? The same old Cnidos
with squid hanging from nets at fishermen's bars near the quay.
Amathus with its clever goldsmiths no longer attracts her.
Even the skies are boring. What she wants is Adonis,
that gorgeous young man, that dream turned to delicious flesh.
For him she pretends to outdoorsy interests, gets outfitted
for them,
finding among those simple tunics that huntresses wear
some that reveal a tempting glimpse of cleavage or thigh.
The colors are earthy, simple, and not at all unbecoming.
She only goes after small game like rabbits, or sometimes deer,
but never the larger beasts that, when they are cornered, turn,