walked with a jauntier, confident stride Telethusa noticed.
Confident? Yes, or one might even describe it as bold.
The set of her jaw was different, and the way she held her head.
Her complexion also was changed, darker now. With resolve?
Her features were sharper, stronger. And her hair was becoming
shorter.
That was most strange. The daughter was less and less girlish, was
turning
into a boy, was changing gender, had changed. Could it be?
Can such things happen? Can gods rescue us thus? They feared
to trust their senses and minds. But what other way did they have
to hope or even to think of? "Let us return to the shrine,
my child," Telethusa said, "to offer our thanks to Isis,
who redeems that life she once spared and makes it worth your
living.
They give the gifts with gladness, and set up a tablet to praise
the goddess and also let other suppliants know that even
the farthest fetched prayers can be answered, that miracles happen:
FOR · ANSWERED · PRAYERS · OF · IPHIS · THE · MAIDEN · THE · YOUNG ·
MAN · GIVES · THANKS.
In the sunlight that broke through the morning haze, the tablet
glinted.
The day was turning clear and fine for the marriage of Iphis,
the handsome, grateful bridegroom, and Ianthe, his lovely bride.

BOOK X

From these festivities Hymen went to his next appointment
among the Ciconians, there to preside at Orpheus' wedding,
which didn't go well. A bad job all around. The torch
the god held kept smoking and dying out in a most
inauspicious manner. The guests were concerned, alarmed,
and then, in a matter of moments, horrified, for the bride,
on the grass among her attendant naiads, stepped on a viper,
whose sharp and envenomed fangs killed her at once. The
wedding
abruptly turned to a wake. Orpheus, the bridegroom,
all but out of his mind with grief, went into mourning,
carrying his complaint to the ends of the earth and beyond,
even down to the shadows below, where the insubstantial
spirits shimmer. There, he sang out in pain and anger:
"Gods of the dim domain to which we are all consigned
sooner or later, hear me. I do not come as a tourist,
as Hercules did, or for sport to fight the three-headed dog
with snakes on its head. I am here to follow my wife, my bride,
whom a serpent abruptly dispatched in her youth's prime. I have
tried
to bear it, to come to terms with the world's inherent unfairness,
and master my grief, but I cannot. I cannot go on this way.
In the name of love, I am here to throw myself on your mercy—
for love, I believe, extends its power even down here.
If the stories we tell in the light of Pluto and Proserpine
are in any way true, then passion has moved and can still
persuade you.
Desperate, bereft, I appear to ask, in the name of these fearsome
caverns, towers, and silent expanses, these ghastly voids,
to grant me your dispensation, undo the decree of the Fates,
and restore to me that young woman you took before her time.
We all come in the end to our ultimate home here. You
receive every man and woman. And you shall have her as well,

but, until she has lived her allotted years, let her be with me,
either above, alive, or else accept me here
and rejoice in the death of us both. Let me remain with her."
But it's risky, even for Ovid, to try to do Orpheus' voice.
What poet, what bard or *Dichter*, does not doubt his powers,
know how clumsy and thick-tongued he is? To perform as the proto-
poet? The task is daunting, and Ovid turns our attention
from cause to effects—he shows us how in that infernal
landscape Orpheus' lyre drew from the insubstantial
shadows physical tears, droplets of water, which formed
on the wraiths of their cheeks. Tantalus, grabbing at water that shrank
from his cup, was transfixed, stopped for a moment his greedy attempts,
listened, and mourned. Close by, Ixion's wheel came to rest.
The vultures, ignoring Tityus' liver, settled to roost.
The daughters of Belus paused with their urns, and Sisyphus stopped
and sat on his huge stone to consider the griefs of the mortal
condition. The Eumenides wept for the first time since creation,
and the queen of darkness granted the suppliant's prayer that his wife,
Eurydice, be summoned. From the newly arrived shades,
the attendants called her. She came, still limping from the viper's
bite, and the mistress of shades gave her up to the singer-
hero of Thrace with this one proviso only—that he
should not turn to look back until he had left Avernus
and returned to the world of the living. Hesitation or doubt,
and the gift would be nullified. A simple enough condition?
It ought to have been, and the singer led the way, ascending
the sloping path through the murk. A long way they traveled, almost
all the way, and, concerned for her, or not quite believing
that it wasn't a cruel delusion, a dream or mirage, he turned
to confirm for himself what he couldn't unreservedly trust,
and there she was, but slipping backward, away, and down.
He reached out his empty arms to hold her, touch her, catch
at the hem of her garment, but nothing. Not even words of complaint,
for what could she charge him with except that he'd loved her, loved her
too much perhaps? She spoke but only one word, "Farewell,"

which he barely heard as he watched her vanish back into darkness.
Grief now, not at all assuaged but redoubled, a bruise
upon a bruise. He was stunned, was catatonic. His heart
was stone, like that nameless man who watched as Hercules dragged
the three-headed dog in chains, and, terrified, turned in an instant
into a monolith. Or what other stones? There's Olenus,
Vulcan's son, who assumed the guilt of his wife, Lethaea's
presumption, and they became a pair of stones—but together
in eternal embrace on Ida's foothills somewhere. Alone,
bereft, and desperate, Orpheus tried to cross yet again
the Styx, but Charon refused him, despite the fact that he camped there
on the riverbank for a week with nothing to eat or drink
but the salt and bitter taste of his own continuous tears
as he cursed the Fates and the gods. At last he picked himself up
and went home to Thrace, to the mountains, Rhodope and Haemus,
that queen and king who, turned to mountains, stand side by side
forever and ever, enduring together the winds and the rains.
Time passed, three years in which Orpheus kept himself clear
of women and love and its risks. Women, of course, loved him,
expressed in one way or another their interest, but he refused them,
preferring the random spasms of passion with adolescent
boys in whom no one invests sentiment, knowing they'd grow,
change, and in any event forget him as promptly as he
would forget each one of them, longing in vain for her.
There is a hill, or call it a mesa. Its top is even,
grassy, and quite devoid of shade as the Sun beats down
on its open space. Listen as Orpheus plays his lyre,
and look, see how the trees assemble, the oaks and poplars
jostling closer to hear him, the lindens and beeches nodding
their leafy heads in praise as laurel, hazel, and ash
all crowd in. The fir and ilex, plane tree, maple,
the willow tree and the boxwood, and even the tropical pine . . .
They want to hear the exquisite songs he sings, the soothing
lyrics that both induce and assuage the pains of the world
to let us suppose, at least for the moment, that we can bear them.
Ivy appears and grapevines, and all the attendant brush
in the green, attentive hush of the earth itself as he strums
his instrument and performs improvisations, inventions,

or entertains himself with impromptus and variations.
Among these assembled arboreal listeners, one is a cypress,
now a tree but before that a boy whom Apollo loved.
On the Carthaean plain of the Island of Cos, there once was a stag,
a huge beast with antlers that spread out from his head
like the limbs of a large tree. Around his neck was a collar
studded with jewels. On his forehead he sported a silver pendant,
and hanging down from his fuzzy ears were matched earrings.
A tame stag, a pet, he had no fear at all of people
but wandered into the homes of those he knew and permitted
strangers to pat his neck and shoulders. But none of his friends
admired him more or cared for him better than this young man
named Cyparissus, who came to him every day to lead him
to fresh pastures and see that the springs were running clear
so that the stag could eat and drink. He would, on occasion,
fashion garlands of flowers to twine in the animal's antlers.
Sometimes he would mount the stag in fun and ride
on his strong back as a joke that the boy and the creature shared.
There are boundaries, and we cross them always at some
peril.
This wildness tamed was one such crossing, as Cyparissus'
love for the beast was another. A simple mistake was their ruin,
when the youth, out hunting, failed to distinguish his pet from
the rest,
who were quarry, legitimate targets. His javelin flew and mortally
wounded the one stag he'd have given his life to protect.
And now he hated his deed, his life, and wanted to die
along with the poor sweet beast. . . . Apollo tried to dissuade him,
to tell him that even grief ought to keep itself in proportion.
Animals die, and men, and it's bitter, but most of them bear it.
The young man would not listen, wailed, and begged of the god
as the only gift he wanted or ever had asked to mourn
forever, to be excused from the ceaseless changing of moods
of the fickle soul, but to focus and stay at that one fixed point
of sorrow. There was no answer, but he felt his life force ebb
and his limbs began to droop and turn green, as he dissolved
from human to rooted tree, a cypress. The woeful god
sighed and at last pronounced a blessing: "I shall mourn
your loss, and you will mourn for others, for you will attend
at the funerals of men to condole with all those who grieve."
For this and the other trees around him, Orpheus sang,
and to beasts who had come to listen, and birds that lit in the
branches

to hear him recite what they knew in their hearts—the pity of
things
and the secret of how to bear it. Orpheus strummed the strings
of his instrument to tune them, to temper them into a concord,
which, if we could only believe it, we might suppose reflected
a cosmic order, a pattern. He raised his voice and intoned:
"Jove, the Lord of the Heavens! All things begin with him,
and I shall begin by celebrating his power and majesty.
Let him inspire me now, not to recount his triumphs,
his lightning bolts and his battles, but something gentler,
sweeter—
diversions, his and ours. Let me celebrate love,
the adversary of death and even sometimes the master
of gods themselves. Their passions for mortals, both boys and
maidens,
I honor and praise, as the last hope of those who are desperate.
"Jupiter loved the delectable Phrygian Ganymede
and turned himself into a bird for the sake of this dishy boy,
but not any bird. . . . Oh, no! It had to be one that could carry
the monstrous thunderbolts. An enormous eagle with talons
large enough to sustain the Trojan boy, which he did,
catching him up and flying back to the heights of Olympus,
where now, despite the distaste of Juno, he serves at banquets,
filling the nectar cups of his master and all the gods.
"Another such favored fellow was Hyacinthus. Apollo
would have done much the same for him, plucking him up
and setting him high in the sky, had fate allowed it. But still
a kind of immortal fame attaches to him, each spring
when Aries bounds into the heavens, taking the watch from
Pisces,
for then Hyacinthus appears and blossoms to deck the tender
pale green of new grass. My father, Phoebus, adored him
and abandoned the sacred precincts of Delphi to wander through
Sparta's
meadows, groves, and hillsides carrying Hyacinthus'
nets and snares, or else holding his pack of dogs on the leash,
putting aside for the time his godhead to serve as adoring
gallant, attendant, servant, and would-be lover and friend.
The more time he spent with this handsome youth, the more
deeply
his spirit burned with ardor. One day, at noon, they decided
to try an athletic contest, stripped down, oiled their bodies,
and readied themselves to compete with discus throws. The god