

(*Aetia*, book 1, frag. 1: proem)

Οἶδ' ὄτ]ι μοι Τελαχίνες ἐπιτρύζουσιν ἀοιδῆ

So reactionaries and radicals complain
that I have no proprietary mission,
no project that's all mine;
instead, I am like a child flipping Pogs
or building in Minecraft, although I'm past forty.
To them I say: keep rolling logs
for one another, but don't waste my time
on your ambition:
marathon runners and shock jocks gain
by going as far as they can, but the sublime,
the useful, and the beautiful in poetry
are all inversely correlated
with size. Shorter means sweeter. I'll be fine.
When first I rated
myself as a writer of some sort,
wolf-killing, light-bearing Apollo came to me
as a ferret. Stay off crowded trains, he said; never resort
to volume where contrast will do. Imitate
Satie, or Young Marble Giants. The remedy for anomie
lies in between the wing slips of the cicada.
If I can't be weightless, or glide among twigs, or sate
myself on dew, then let
my verses live that way,
since I feel mired in age, and worse for wear.
It might even be that when the Muses visit
a girl, or a schoolboy, they intend to stay,
or else to come back, even after the poet goes gray.

(*Aetia*, book 3, frag. 67–75)

Αὐτὸς Ἔρωσ ἐδίδαξεν Ἀκόντιον, ὅπποτε καλῆ

This is a story with a happy ending.

If you met Aaron early enough in his life
you might have wondered who taught him the arts
of conversation, he who could put anyone,
adult or child or
in between, at ease,
yet got tongue-tied when he brought up Cydippe,
he who wanted nothing more than to see her,
in fact, to spend the rest of his life beside her,
so that the world would see him as her husband.
They had a lot in common. The two of them met
at Delos, at the big sacrifice; he came
all the way from Iulis. They would talk
about how both of their mothers were engineers,
how both had family in the islands,
about the races outdoors, about where to stand
to avoid the crowds at the temple.

But already other sons' mothers regarded her
as the prize, bringing bride-gifts, bringing whole oxen,
although, in her own eyes, she was far too young.
Nobody else stood out in the morning dances;
nobody else reminded
so many observers of the rose-gold dawn.

He stood out too, but frankly
it made him uncomfortable.

More than uncomfortable. You might have heard
he spelled his name differently then. People singled him out
in school, and at parties, back home. He liked the attention,
but only at first. He got really into archery,
and all of us thought he just liked spending time in the sun.
In fact he was praying
to Artemis, to the thin moon
he observed after dawn, and right before sundown:
praying she might see him,
that Cydippe might see him, the way
he so badly wanted to be seen.

That the proverbial archer might strike her too—
not Artemis nor Apollo: the other one. That it might hurt
just a little. That they could talk about his prayers.

And that's just what happened. "I think you're brave," she said.
"I don't think you deserve to be afraid."

Bad news: by then her mother had arranged,
of course,

for Cydippe to marry someone else.
Good news: our heroes got to spend
the night together first, because the cult
of Hera insists—

I'm going to get in trouble, serious trouble,
if I go into detail here. Just know
that families in Hera's cult insist
on this kind of bridal evening. For the education
of daughters, who will then make better wives.

Next morning the families led
two oxen to the pool where they would see
the point of the blade that would tear their hearts out that night.
That's part of the Hera cult too. But that afternoon
Cydippe had a fit. A literal fit,
the kind that makes people behave like wild goats,
flailing and barking. They thought she was going to die,
and canceled the ritual. And then she got better.

And then the ceremony was back on,
at which point she came down with a boiling fever,
which lasted seven months. As if she had worked for it.
And then she could breathe again, so they set the wedding
for a third date, and then she came down with a chill,
more than a chill: a frost fever, so her very lips
and eyes seemed to congeal, as if she could not
remain for long in this cold world . . .

At this point Cydippe's father knew enough
to pray to Apollo, who came to him that night.
"My sister will not permit this marriage," said the god.
"She was right there in her shrine, though you did not see,
at the festival in Delos,
when your child swore that Aaron, and nobody else,
would be her husband. Yes, her husband.

And now, if you care for your daughter, you'll listen to me.

For one thing, she swore an oath, and she's bound to keep it, and my sister agrees." The god reached over his shoulder, grasping one of his sun-bright arrows. Artemis, too, can shoot such radiant arrows with perfect aim, though hers look more like moonlight. "For another," the sun god went on, "if you let her marry Aaron, you will not blend lead with silver, but rather mix your silver with his gold. You know your own stock. He comes from mountain climbers, and from wind tamers; his family taught their island to catch quail in wind-borne nets."

So Aaron came back to Naxos, and the girls whom Artemis befriended said their hymns, including the marriage hymn, over both of them, and Aaron, for all you love to hunt and sprint and shoot, I know you would not have traded that night for anything: neither the sandals of Aphra, so fast she covered a whole field of wheat by running across the crests of the wheat-ears, nor everything Midas owned.

For people are not possessions.

Lovers are not possessions, neither each other's, nor their families'. If you have known love you should know that, especially if you serve Artemis, whose brother told the truth. Cydippe's family still lives, with many children, up at Iulis; their story came down to us in Zeno's collection, the one with the islands' tales.

(*Galatea*, frag. 378)

ἢ μᾶλλον χρύσειον ἐν ὄφρυσιν ἱερὸν ἰχθύν

That island feast

was more than a feast; there Kyra and Kassandra
met us, and there was golden-broiled giant bream with coriander,
pounded with a mallet until tender,
green olives and capers and garlic and tiny lemons,
and while I felt like a sleek finch on a sleek perch
while taking part in that repast,
afterwards I just wanted to take a nap;
so we did, together,
and when we woke it was dark, the moon scattered
her glitter all over the brine, and we were already
entangled in each other, or rather
in one another,
and so we decided to stay that way (letting Kassandra
take down her soft and complicated hair,
and letting comfort alter
our positions as we chose, neither seeking
nor finding much sleep),
and we stayed that way till the sun came up
in the East.

(Lyric, frag. 227)

Ἔνεστ' Ἀπόλλων τῷ χορῷ· τῆς λύρης ἀκούω·

Apollo has come to our house party, and Aphrodite,
and also karaoke.

Whoever stays up till dawn
goes home with the panettone,
or anything else left over, or anyone,
provided he or she or they want to go home.

Castor and Pollux, send us company.
None of our friends deserves to sleep alone.

(Epigram 62)

Αἶνιε καὶ σὺ γὰρ ὤδε Μενέκρατες οὐκ ἐπὶ πουλὺ

Caro, you didn't seem to experience more
than a little of our blowout last night.

What happened? Are you OK? You know I'm a friend you can trust.

Honestly you look like someone decided to joust
against a centaur, or a champion equestrian,
with your head as the grand prize.

Whom should I sue for excessive use of force?

"Calli, please

let me go back to sleep upstairs if I can.

I don't know if it was the wine,

or when I told Niko about my crush, thanks to that wine,
but I feel like I've been kicked in the nose by a horse."

(Epigram 64)

Οὕτως ὑπνώσαις, Κωνόπιον, ὡς ἐμὲ ποιεῖς

Sleep, Conopion, sleep
as you make your admirer sleep
on the colder stones beside your bolted door;
sleep, Conopion, sleep
without regrets, without a second thought
of the hardened and shivering man you don't want anymore.
If you wake, and stand, and see
your lover prone under your window, and without
much hope of you to keep the chill away,
you'll surely go back to sleep
and leave your neighbors to ask
what pitilessness could leave him there till day.

(*Aetia*, book 2, frag. 48)

ὥς τε Ζεὺς ἐράτιζε τριηκοσίους ἐνιαυτούς

Zeus (I read here) once made love for three hundred years.

It doesn't say how, or with whom.

Nor do we hear

whether his partner, or partners, were into it
that much, or one three-hundredth that much.

As for me, I'm just starved for touch,
or else exhausted from yearning every minute.

Unsatisfied love is a tomb.

(Epigram 43)

Εἰ μὲν ἐκῶν, Ἄρχιν', ἐπεκώμασα, μυρία μέμφου,

It's easier to explain if we use Mr. Spock.

Had it been my decision
to develop a crush on you, you may
indeed have objected: it is most illogical.

It might, indeed, offend.

And yet, if neurobiology will require
me to experience this emotion
and, moreover, to communicate it, well . . .

It's not like we can turn back the relevant clock;
it's not like I stood in your right-of-way
at midnight and threw pebbles at your window.

All I did was leave a note on your door.

I have been, and always shall be, your friend.

(Epigram 53)

Τὸν τὸ καλὸν μελανεῦντα Θεόκριτον, εἰ μὲν ἔμ' ἔχθει

The lord of the gods gets crushes on people too.
Theo has started to grow a lovely beard.
If he's into me, may holy Zeus show him favor
in equal measure, as much as I love him—no,
may Zeus favor him more,
by a factor of four.

But if Theo won't text me back (so many guys
make you wait, or ghost you), may Zeus despise
that beautiful man and everything he owns.
May he be hated from now on. May he be feared.
May his heart weigh four times what it weighed before,
so that he, too, feels this awkward,
and has to stay home.

(*Hecale*, frag. 274)

άρμοί που κάκείνω ἐπέτρεχε λεπτὸς ἴουλος

Honestly I don't know
if he'd want me to say so,
but I love how he has just
now started to grow a beard—

I could tell from the delicate hair—no, the down
on his cheek. I thought of the tips
of the petals of the Italian immortelle
which are, also, gold.

I could see, when he blushed,
his pride, his satisfaction
(he had been waiting so long for it):
he had just shaved.

(Epigram 32)

Θεσσαλικὴ Κλεόνικε, τάλαν, τάλαν, οὐ μὰ τὸν ὄξυν

I hate to say it, Lee, but you look awful.

I barely recognized you. Where have you been?

And you look so thin,

part sunburned, part pale as a bone.

Now I get it. You've been hanging out
with Taylor, who has that effect on everyone.

You look in their eyes and forget to eat,

and then, after they forget
about you, nothing and no one else seems worthwhile,
all other wishes canceled, all pleasure unlawful.

(Epigram 44)

Ἐλκος ἔχων ὁ ξεῖνος ἐλάνθανεν· ὡς ἀνηρὸν

You were already in pain
when you came over for dinner, but the extent
of your internal injury didn't show
till that third glass of wine.
Then your face fell. It was like watching all the petals
drop from a rose at once—like time-lapse photography.
I couldn't not see it. I couldn't not see what it meant.
Someone broke into your heart and stole all the valuables.
I've been that kind of thief. But I didn't say so.
Instead I just said, "I've been there. I know."

(Epigram 45)

Ἔστι τι ναὶ τὸν Πᾶνα κεκρυμμένον, ἔστι τι ταύτη

Warm ashes may flare up when stirred,
no matter how gently. Hermes, Dionysus, and Pan—
god of ferment, god of wild woods, god of pretenders—
created me that way; maybe I ought to feel shame,
and yet, to tell the truth, I'd rather not skip it.

That said, I hope he won't rush me.

 You might have heard.

That quiet one who tilts his head like a whippet
has only to touch me,
and I fall apart like a heap of cinders.
An underground stream can topple a granite home.

(*Hecale*, frag. 256)

λέξομαι ἐν μυχάτῳ· κλισίη δέ μοί ἐστιν ἐτοίμη

Don't worry, you
can have the bed; I'll take the couch
by the door, in the living room, as usual.

(Iamb 10, frag. 200a)

Τὰς Ἀφροδίτας—ἡ θεὸς γὰρ οὐ μία—

There are so many versions of Aphrodite,
so many incarnations.
The one I first met in the Castro beats all the rest,
for wisdom, I mean. For wisdom.
She, and she only, accepts sacrifices of pork.
She is the goddess of no particular nation,
no singular standard of beauty,
no rules at the door. No one form of love is best.
Michel did a lot to support her: I thank him
for that, though otherwise he was a jerk.

(Epigram 27)

Ὅμοσε Καλλίγνωτος Ἴωνίδι μήποτ' ἐκείνης

Once they decided to make a home together
Cal told Ione that he would never consider
anybody else as his regular lover;
all of us knew he was bi, but he said he would never
place any guy, or any woman, above her.
Now it's as if he were poisoned, or else on fire,
throwing off sparks left and right, for a brand-new crush,
who happens to be nonbinary. As for
Ione, all his friends now have to push
ourselves to see, or even to think about her,
poor girl, who last week thought she was his primary.

(Epigram 24)

Ἀστακίδην τὸν Κρήτα τὸν αἰπόλον ἤρπασε Νύμφη

The shepherds I know tell stories for one another,
and mostly they're not about Daphne escaping Apollo,
dramatic natural disasters,
or even the broad sails of the bravest Argives.
We prefer Scott and Emma, or Gray and Tess,
who crossed a continent to be together,
having realized that each would follow
the other anywhere, that they would rather
rip up their lives than stay apart, that their loves
were real and true and strong,
no less so for how long
they themselves believed they were more like sisters, or
brothers.

(Epigram 33)

Ὠγρευτής, Ἐπίκουδες, ἐν οὔρεσι πάντα λαγῶν

When you can't be with somebody you want to be with—
you're too far away, or it's not allowed—
your love for them takes on the status of myth.
When you're always together, it's harder.

In the same way, the dedicated hunter
tracks the fugitive deer or rabbit through mist,
bramble, frost,
mud, snow, rotten ice, and swamp water
before day's blinding glare or night's thick shroud.
Yet bring the same
hunter the same prey animal, tamed,
or wounded, or docile, or otherwise ready for slaughter,
and the hunter will decide—
Um, no.

Love shouldn't work like that. If love is a hunt,
it should be about who you want
at your back, or by your side
with dagger, chakram, trident, or short bow,
not what you string up in your larder.

(Epigram 39)

Τὰ δῶρα τὰ φροδίτη

It's hard work making people fall in love,
even harder to get them to stay that way. No wonder
my friend Simone has built, for the goddess of love,
an idiosyncratic altar:
on it, one tube of lip gloss, a charm bracelet, car keys,
a rental agreement for a basement apartment,
a doorbell, a star for a Christmas tree, a salt or
pepper shaker, the mouthpiece
for a pocket trumpet, a pill splitter, and under
them all, a folded velvet satchel,
in which the lucky couple
who stay together into a shared old age
can keep whatever other sentiment-
al objects they decide to save.

(*Aetia*, book 4, frag. 101a)

"Ἡρῆ τῆ Σαμίῃ περὶ μὲν τρίχας ἄμπελος ἔρπει

Snakes stand for danger, but also for things intertwining,
pairs of sacred opposites:
companionship and time alone,
or sun and fog, or jealousy and compersion.
Thus the snake-shaped grape-
vine, with its bits
and buds, its shining
granite scales, that a master carver set
in low relief around the combed-out locks
of Hera in the lovely stone
of the Samian idol, its style
Eastern, almost Persian,
is not, as some assume, a spiteful crown
reflecting her victory over Dionysus,
her husband's son who is not her son,
but rather a hopeful sign
of what's now on her mind:
this version of Hera finds
great joy in the knowledge
of lovers intertwined,
as long as they're equals, as long as they're enthusiastic.
To bloom and grow in more than one
direction, like the garland, is a privilege,
though also an exertion.
It's fantastic,
as long as it's not a pursuit or a power play:
as long as it's warm rain on a bright day,
not a thunderclap, or an atmospheric inversion.

(*Aetia*, book 4, frag. 101b)

Ἦρη τῇ Σαμίῃ περὶ μὲν τρίχας ἄμπελος ἔρπει

Snakes stand for danger, but also for things intertwining,
pairs of sacred opposites:
companionship and time alone,
or sun and fog, or jealousy and compersion.
Apollo once had trouble sharing them
with other gods, since snakes were his own emblem;
you might not have seen him as one of the quiet divinities,
much less
as a patron of introverts and introversion,
but all the arts (so he used to believe) are his,
and in his youth he spent too much time pining
for girls who would rather be trees.
Yet in the version
of his life that I prefer,
he's far
from bossy: he shows affinities
for lyricists and sculptors and portrait
painters who work best at dusk and dawn,
who draw with ash and earth, with charcoal, crayon
or pale
inkstones; whose art consists
of undertone and trill, hint and subversion,
without a single lead. It's an ensemble
cast, whose hits
are trios and duets,
sometimes in third, sometimes in second person.

(Epigram 47)

Ὡς ἀγαθὴν Πολύφαμος ἀνεύρετο τὰν ἐπαιοιδᾶν

Fun fact: long ago, in the age of myth
 (so Theocritus says) Polyphemus the Cyclops discovered
a remedy for the pains of unsatisfied lovers;
 pursued by the vision of someone he'd never be with,
he lifted his lyre and made up a song about it.
 The Muses know what they're doing. He was wise.

Such wisdom cures all aches.
 In the same way, starvation
removes the dissatisfaction
 of longing; it's quite a cure for that disease,
and surely we ought to know how to defend
ourselves. Erotic love is merciless,
 but you and I, Polyphemus, can live without it.
We're not afraid of you, Love. We know many ways
 to pin your wings.
I have one friend
 who cuts herself. I know another who sings.