

Private Circulation

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THE STORY OF PHAETHON; AND, THE WEIGHT WAS LIGHT

... And here Clymene's son
Came climbing, up the stairway to the palace,
Entered the palace which might be his father's,
Turned toward the face that might have been his father's,
And stopped, far off; he could not bear that radiance.
Clothed in a robe of crimson, there was Phoebus
High on the throne, with brightest emeralds gleaming,
To left and right the Days, the Months, the Years,
The Centuries, stood, and the Hours, at even spaces,
Young Spring was there, wearing a crown of flowers,
And naked Summer, carrying sheaves of grain,
And Autumn, stained with trodden grapes, and Winter,
Icy, with hoary hair.

And from their center
The all-seeing Sun saw this young man, who trembled
At all the strangeness. "Phaethon," he said,
"What have you come here for, to this high dwelling?
What do you seek, O Phaethon, my son,
Undoubtedly my son?" And the boy answered:
"O common light of the great universe,
Phoebus, my father, if I have the right
To use that name, and my mother is not lying
To hide some guilt with false pretence, my father,
Give me a proof, so people will believe me,
Know me for what I am, and let my mind
Be free from doubting!" As he spoke, the Sun-god
Put off his diadem of light, and called him
Closer and held him fast, and said, "My son,
You are worthy of acknowledgement; your mother
Has told no lies about your birth. To prove it,
To make you doubt the less, ask any favor,
Whatever you will; it surely will be granted,
I swear by Styx. I have never seen that river,
But no god takes his name in vain, so let him
Be witness of my promise."

As he ended,
Or even before, the boy asked for the chariot,
Control, for one day, over the winged horses.
Too late to take the oath back, but the father
Repented having sworn it; over and over
He shook his shining head. "Your words," he said,

"Have made mine rash: could I take back the promise,
This is the only thing I would deny you.
So, let me try persuasion. What you want,
My son, is dangerous; you ask for power
Beyond your strength and years: your lot is mortal,
But what you ask beyond the lot of mortals.
Poor ignorant boy, you ask for more than gods
Have any claim on. Each of them may do
Much as he will, but none of them has power,
With one exception, your father, to hold the reins
Riding that fiery car. Not even Jove,
Hurler of thunderbolts, could drive this chariot,
And who is greater than Jove? The road at first
Is steep, up-hill, and the horses hardly make it
With all their morning ardor fresh upon them.
Then it runs very high across mid-Heaven,
So very high that I myself am frightened
Sometimes, to see the world so far below me.
Last it descends as steeply as it rises,
Needing the tightest kind of rein: the goddess,
Tethys, who takes me to her ocean waters,
Has often feared for me in that downward plunging.
To make bad matters worse, the sky is always
Whirling with dizzy motion, and the stars
Wheel with its speed. I make my way against it,
I drive against the turning systems, safely,
But you—suppose you had my chariot, could you
Keep the wheels steady, fight the spin of the world?
Do you think there are cities there, and lovely woodlands,
And temples rich with gifts? No, no, my son!
That highway runs through every lurking danger,
Past fearful monsters. Even on the course,
Even with no mistake at all, you must
Pass the Bull's lowered horns, the savage Archer,
The Lion, open-mouthed, the wicked Scorpion
Curving the sweep of his arms in one direction,
The Crab another. And it is not easy
To hold those horses, hot with fire, and snorting
From mouth and nostrils. I can hardly hold them
When they warm up for the work and fight the bridle.
Beware, my son! I do not want to give you



The gift of death; there is time to change your prayer.
 Of course you want the most convincing proof
 I am your father. That I give you, surely,
 By fearing as I do. I am proved a father
 By a father's fear. Look at me! You see my face;
 Would you could see my heart and all the cares
 Held there for you, my son. Or look about you,
 Ask something, anything, from all those riches
 Of Heaven, earth, and ocean: you shall have it!
 Only this one thing do not ask, I beg you;
 A punishment, not a favor. Silly boy,
 Why put those pleading arms around me? Doubt not,
 It will be given, whatever you choose. I swore it.
 But choose more wisely!"

So his warning ended,
 And did no good, as Phaethon insisted
 On what he first had asked, to drive the chariot.
 All that the father could do was keep him waiting,
 But he finally consented, led him down
 To where the chariot stood, the work of Vulcan,
 Axle and pole of gold, and tires of gold,
 And spokes of silver, and along the yoke
 Chrysolites shone, and every kind of jewel
 Gave back the bright reflection. And the boy
 Was marveling at the craftsmanship, when, look you,
 Aurora, watcher of the rosy morning,
 Opened the crimson portals and the courtways
 All full of roses, and the stars were gone,
 Whom Lucifer, last of all to leave the heaven,
 Marshalled along their way.

The Sun-god saw him,
 Saw the world redden, and the moon's thin crescent
 Vanish from sight, and bade the speedy Hours
 To yoke the horses, and they did so, quickly,
 Leading them from the lofty stalls, with fire
 Breathed from the nostrils, and well-fed, on juices
 Of rich ambrosial fodder. Then the harness
 Was put in place, and the Sun-god, for protection,
 Touched his son's face with holy medication,
 Put on the radiant diadem, and sighed
 From his foreboding heart, and said: "At least,
 My son, perhaps you can obey a father's warning:
 Go easy on the whip, hard on the reins;
 They need no urging, the trouble is, to hold them.
 Do not cut straight through the five zones of Heaven:
 The course runs on a slant, a middle pathway
 Missing the north and south. Follow the wheel-tracks,
 You will see them clearly. Sky and earth both need
 Equal degrees of heat: too low, you burn
 The one, too high the other. The middle is safest.
 Beware, on the right, the writhing of the Serpent,

Beware, on the left, the dangerous sunken Altar:
 Keep between both. The rest I leave to Fortune
 To help you, and to give you, or I hope so,
 Better direction than you give yourself.
 And now, while I am talking, dewy night
 Has reached her goal in the West. We cannot linger.
 Our call is on us. Look! The dawn is glowing,
 The shadows gone. Here, take the reins, and hold them,
 Or better still—there still is time—be taking
 My counsel, not my chariot. Let me light
 The world, and you stand there, on solid ground,
 And watch in safety."

But while he was talking
 The boy was in the car, and stood there proudly,
 Holding the reins, all happiness, and thanking
 His father for the gift he gave unwilling.
 Meanwhile the horses, Pyrois, Eous,
 Aethon, and Phlegon, filled the air with neighing,
 Snorting, and pawing at their bars. And Tethys,
 Ignorant of her grandson's fate, let fall
 The barriers: they had their chance at Heaven,
 The horses, now, and took it, and their hoofs
 Cut through the clouds before them, and their wings
 Bore them aloft, and they overtook the winds
 That rose from the same east. But the weight was light,
 Not such as they were used to, and the yoke
 Without its usual pressure; so, as schooners,
 Unballasted, careen and roll and yaw
 Out of proper course, so the bright chariot
 Tosses and bounds, as if there were no driver.
 It did not take the horses long to know it,
 To run away, beyond control; the driver,
 In panic, does not know in which direction
 To turn the reins, does not know where the road is,
 And even if he knew, he could do nothing
 With those wild plunging animals. The Bear,
 For the first time in all his life, grew hot
 And tried, in vain, to seek forbidden oceans
 For coolness, and the Serpent, near the pole,
 Torpid and harmless with the chill upon him
 Burned into angry fury, and the Plow-Ox,
 Clumsy and tame in the shafts of his heavy wagon,
 Went dashing off in terror.

From the Heaven
 The unhappy boy looked down. Far, far below him
 He saw the lands, and he grew pale; his knees
 Trembled beneath him, and the darkness came
 Into his eyes from too much light. He wishes
 He had never touched those horses of his father.
 To have learned his birth was nothing, to have gained
 By pleading now seems worse than loss; he might be



The son of Merops, he would be even eager
 To have them call him so. But he is borne
 Like a ship before a gale, unsteered, unmastered,
 Abandoned to the gods and useless praying.
 What should he do? Much of the sky behind him,
 Much more is still ahead. Imagination
 Measures them both, and his eyes, at times, look forward
 To the West he will not reach, again look back
 Eastward, and he is dazed and stunned and dazzled,
 And neither drops the reins or really holds them.
 He does not know the horses' names. And terror
 Is doubled, tripled, as he sees around him
 Strange figures in the sky and savage beasts,
 The Scorpion, for instance, arms outreaching
 In two half-circles, and the other members
 Spread over infinite acres, and black poison
 Stinking and rank, and the threatening curved stinger.
 Out of his senses, with cold fear upon him,
 Phaethon dropped the reins.

And when the horses
 Feel them across their backs, and none to check them,
 Bolting, they charge the air of unknown regions,
 Wherever impulse hurls them, lawless, crashing
 Against high stars; they keep the chariot bounding
 Through pathless ways, now high, now low, toward Heaven
 Or plunging sheer toward earth. The Moon, in wonder,
 Watches her brother's horses running lower
 Than her own steeds. The scorched clouds smoke. The mountains
 Of earth catch fire, the prairies crack, the rivers
 Dry up, the meadows are white-hot, the trees,
 The leaves burn to a crisp, the crops are tinder.
 I grieve at minor losses. The great cities
 Perish, and their great walls; and nations perish
 With all their people: everything is ashes.
 The woods and mountains burn, Athos and Taurus,
 Tmolus and Oete; all the springs of Ida
 Dry up, and Helicon, home of the Muses,
 Haemus and Aetna blaze, twin-peaked Parnassus,
 And Eryx, Cynthus, Othrys. The snow is gone
 From Rhodope at last; Dindyma, Mimas,
 Mycale, burn, and holiest Cithaeron.
 The cold cannot save Scythia, whose landmark,
 Caucasus, burns, and Ossa burns, and Pindus,
 And Mount Olympus, greater than both together,
 The Alps, the cloud-topped Apennines, are burning.

And Phaethon sees the earth on fire; he cannot
 Endure this heat, the blast of some great furnace.
 Under his feet he feels the chariot glowing
 White-hot; he cannot bear the sparks, the ashes,
 The soot, the smoke, the blindness. He is going

Somewhere, that much he knows, but where he is
 He does not know. They have their way, the horses.

And that was when, or so men think, the people
 Of Africa turned black, since the blood was driven
 By that fierce heat to the surface of their bodies,
 And Libya was desert, and the nymphs
 Mourned for their pools and fountains. And the rivers,
 Wide though they might have been, had no more safety:
 The Don was smoking, and the Erymanthus,
 And Xanthus, which would know a second burning
 In years to come, the serpentine Maeander,
 Yellow Lycormas, Thracian Melas, perish,
 And Sparta sees Eurotas burn: Orontes,
 Thermodon, Danube, Bablyon's Euphrates,
 From Ganges to the golden sands of Tagus,
 All burning, burning; the Maeonian swans
 Whose melodies were heard along Cayster
 Were heard no more. And the Nile fled in terror
 And hid its head in earth, and it stays hidden,
 No man to-day knows where. The seven mouths
 Are empty, filled with dust, seven dry channels.
 Hebrus and Strymon dry up, and the Western rivers,
 The Po, the Rhine, the Rhone, and very Tiber
 Promised dominion over all the world.
 The earth gapes open and the light goes down
 Deep to the underworld, whose king and queen
 Blink in their terror of it. Even the ocean
 Shrinks to a plain of sand; the hidden mountains
 Emerge to join the Cyclades; the dolphins
 Dare leap and curve in the high air no longer;
 The fish dive deep, and the dead seals are floating,
 White-bellied, on the surface. The story has it
 That Nereus and Doris and their daughters
 Found even their deep-sea caverns hot and stifling.
 Neptune, with scowling countenance, dared lift
 His arms, three times, above the waves; three times
 He could not bear the fiery air.

And Earth,
 Our mother, circled by the ocean,
 Amid the waters and the shrinking fountains
 Contracting into her darkness, parched by heat,
 Raised up her stifled face, and put a hand
 To shield her forehead, and her trembling made
 Everything shudder. She sank down again,
 Lower than ever before, and then she spoke:
 "O greatest of the gods, if this is pleasing
 And I deserve it, why hold back the lightning?
 If I must die by fire, then let me perish
 By fire you send, and lighten the destruction
 Because you are its author. I can hardly"—



The smoke was suffocating—"open my lips to speak;
 Look at my hair, burned crisp; look at the ashes
 In eyes and face! Is this what I am given
 For being fruitful, dutiful? For bearing
 The wounds of harrow and plowshare, year on year?
 Is this my due reward for giving fodder
 To flocks and herds, and corn to men, and incense
 For the gods' altars? Maybe I deserve it,
 But what about the ocean, and your brother?
 Neptune's allotted waters ebb and vanish,
 Farther and farther from Heaven. Well; never mind him,
 Never mind me, but have a little pity
 For your own skies. Look! On both sides the poles
 Are smoking. If that fire corrupts the heavens
 Your palaces will topple. Even Atlas
 Strains and can hardly bear his white-hot burden.
 If sea and land and sky are lost, we are hurled
 Into the ancient chaos. Save us, father;
 Preserve this residue; take thought, take counsel
 For the sum of things."

The Earth could say no more,
 So fierce the smothering heat, and she sank deeper
 Into the caverns nearer the world below us.
 But the almighty father called for witness
 All of the gods, and most of all the Sun-god
 Who had given his son the chariot, that all things
 Would perish if he did not help, and quickly.
 And then he sought the citadel of Heaven,
 Its very peak and pinnacle, whence he spreads
 Clouds over the world and sets his thunder rolling
 And hurls his lightning-bolts. But now he has
 No clouds to veil the earth with, and no rainfall:
 But he makes thunder sound, and poises lightning
 Head-high in his right hand, and flings it from him,
 Striking the charioteer, and the bolt smashes
 His car, his life. So fire extinguished fire,
 And the mad horses leapt, tore loose the yoke,
 Broke from the broken reins. The axle lies
 Far from the pole, the spokes and wheels are shattered,
 The wreckage scatters far.

And Phaethon,
 His ruddy hair on fire, falls streaming down
 The long trail of the air. A star, sometimes,
 Falls from clear heaven, so, or seems to fall.
 And far from home, a river-god receives him,
 Bathes his poor burning face, and the Western Naiads
 Give burial to the broken body, smoking
 With the fire of that forked bolt, and on the stone
 They carve an epitaph:

*Here Phaethon lies,
 Who drove his father's chariot: if he did not*

Hold it, at least he fell in splendid daring.
 And his poor father, sick at heart, refused
 To show his countenance, and one whole day,
 Or so men say, went by without the sun.
 The fire supplied what light there was—how useful!
 And the boy's mother, after she had said
 Whatever could be said on such occasions,
 Out of her mind with grief, tearing her bosom,
 Went wandering over the world, to find the body,
 Or anyway the bones, and found the bones,
 At last, but buried by a foreign river.
 She threw herself beside the tomb, her tears
 Fell on the letters graven in the marble
 Where she could read his name, and her arms fondled
 The gravestone to her breast. And all her daughters
 Joined in her useless ritual of sorrow.
 By night and day they call upon their brother
 Who will not hear them, ever, and they lie there,
 Before the sepulchre, and the moon filled
 And waned, and filled, four times, and in their custom
 (By now it was a custom) still they sorrowed,
 Wanted to fling herself to earth, and could not
 Till one day Phaethusa, the oldest daughter,
 Because, she made complaint, her feet had stiffened;
 Lampetia, the fair one, tried to help her
 And could not move at all, suddenly rooted
 In earth; another sister, tearing her hair,
 Pulled leaves away, and another, and another,
 Found shins and ankles were wood, and arms were branches,
 And as they looked at these, in grief and wonder,
 Bark closed around their loins, their breasts, their shoulders,
 Their hands, but still their lips kept calling *Mother!*
 What could Clymene do but follow impulse,
 Run every which way, try to kiss each daughter,
 Tear loose the bark, break off the little twigs
 At the fingers' ends? But the broken twigs were bleeding,
 And each one, wounded, cried, "Don't hurt me, mother!
 That is no tree you are tearing, but my body.
 Farewell, farewell!" And then the bark closed over
 The last words each one said, but still their tears
 Kept flowing down, till, hardened by sunlight,
 They turned to amber, and the shining river
 Receives them, bears them on, to be the jewels
 Of Roman brides, hereafter.

Born a year and some change after Julius Caesar's fateful Ides of March, Publius Ovidius Naso has published numerous works of poetry, including Amores, Metamorphoses, and Remedia Amoris. He currently lives and works in Brooklyn, New York.
