For beneath the rising dawn, when my lamplight was sleeping—
that time when true dreams can be seen—
the loom's warp slipped from my fingers as they slackened,
I gave my neck to my pillow to be held.

Here, I dreamed without a doubt that I saw a dolphin
swimming before my eyes in the windy waves.
A swell dashed him on the ever-thirsting sands, and in an instant,
he was abandoned both by the wave and his life.
Whatever this means, I fear it, and don't you laugh at my nightmares;
don't trust your arms to a sea that's not still!
If you won't spare yourself, spare this girl, your beloved,
whose safety depends on your own.

But within the broken waves, peace is now coming.
Use all your heart to cleave the gentle paths.
But for now, while the straits still deny passage for swimmers,
may this letter allay the odious wait.

Heroides XX: Acontius to Cydippe

Acontius tricked Cydippe into vowing to marry him. He now writes to her and urges her to honor her vow despite the fact that she is betrothed to another.

Stop worrying. No need for a second oath to your lover:
That you have promised once is enough for me.
May your reading this through diminish your languor.
It pains me that you should feel any pain.
Why are you blushing? Just as in the temple of Diana,
I suspect your modest cheeks have turned red.
I'm asking for a pledged marriage, not a transgression,
not as an adulterer, but as your future husband.
Remember the words on the fruit I plucked, on the apple
I tossed and that your chaste hands picked up,
and you will find that you promised what I now am asking,
for you, maiden, not the goddess, to honor.
I am as ardent as ever; in fact my desire is keener;
delay has fanned the flame of my love.
My passion, never slight, has now grown even larger
with the passage of time and the hope you've given.
Yes, you gave me hope, and my ardor has blossomed;
you cannot deny it: Diana is witness.
She was there, a present deity, and noting your words
seemed to accept them by nodding her head.

You may say you were taken in by my deception,
as long as you allow my motive was love.
Union with you was behind all of my scheming.
You complain of what can make us as one.
I am not cunning by nature, nor am I in practice.
If I am clever, you make me so.
Love was the genius behind the words I composed,
if indeed I have accomplished anything.

Love dictated the words of my marriage proposal
and made me into the churl I've become.
Call what I've done fraud, and if you want call me crafty
if it's craft to want to possess what one loves.

Look, I'm writing something again, words of entreaty,
giving you further grounds for offense.
If my love offends you, I'll offend you forever,
striving to win you even when you resist.
Others have used swords to make off with their maidens.
Will my careful letter be considered a crime?
May the gods allow me to further entwine you,
so that your pledge leaves you no wiggle room!
There are a thousand more moves, and I'm already sweating,
but my passion will leave nothing untried.
Yes, the odds are long that you will be taken—
it's up to the gods—but we'll succeed nonetheless.
You might wiggle out here and there, but you will never
escape all the snares Love has set for you.
If wiles will not work I will move on to weapons,
and you will be wrapped in an avid embrace.
Far be it from me to reprimand Paris
nor anyone who has been a real man.
I'll say no more, but if for stealing you death is the penalty,
it will be less than not having you at all.
Were you less beautiful you'd be more modestly courted:
My boldness is driven by your good looks.
You are the cause—you and your eyes burning more brightly
than the shining stars—of my flaming love.
This is all due to your ivory throat, those golden tresses,
the hands that I pray to caress my neck,
your beauty, your face, modest but not at all rustic,
and feet as lovely as Thetis's own.
If I could praise all the rest I would be more ecstatic,
but I'm sure the whole is like all its parts.
Compelled by such beauty it is no wonder
that I wanted to have your vocal pledge.

So, as long as you are forced to confess you have promised,
be, if you want, a girl trapped by my wiles.
I can bear the reproach, as long as I am awarded
compensation for so great a charge.
Ajax won Hesione, and Achilles Briseis.
Each followed the victor as her own lord.
You can reproach me, and you can give vent to your anger,
as long as I can enjoy you enraged.
I who caused your anger will likewise assuage it:
just give me a chance of appeasing you.
Allow me to stand before you, face to face, weeping,
and permit me to add words that suit my tears.
And let me, like a slave in fear of a lashing,
stretch out my poor hands to touch your feet.
You have the right to summon me! Have me plead in person.
Demanding mistress, command me to come!
You may pull out my hair with your imperious fingers,
and leave my face all black and blue.
I will endure anything, my only fear being
that pummeling me your hand might be bruised.

But don't keep me in chains, don't bind me in shackles:
my love for you is bondage enough.
And when your anger has been satisfied fully,
you will say to yourself, "Such long-suffering love!"
You will say to yourself, when you've seen me so patient,
"Such a good slave, let him serve me."
Now, unhappily, I am judged in my absence,
my cause lost with no advocate.

And there's this: however much my inscription wronged you,
I'm not the only one you have to blame.
Artemis doesn't deserve to be traduced along with me.
Trust the goddess even if you can't trust me.
She was present, saw you blush at your ensnarement,
and stored away your words in her heart.

Nothing is more violent—knock on wood!—than this goddess
when she sees that her godhead has been traduced.
Witness the boar of Calydon, fierce, but a mother
was fiercer yet against her own son.
Witness too Actaeon, thought to be a wild beast by the hunters
with whom he had killed wild beasts himself.
And Niobe, the now petrified arrogant mother
who still sits weeping on Phrygian soil.

Ah me, I fear that if I tell you the truth, Cydippe,
I'll seem to warn you falsely for my own sake.
But I still must say it. This is the reason, believe me,
that you often lie abed on your wedding day.
The goddess herself is working to save you from perjury,
striving to keep you from making a false oath.
This is why, when you veer toward oath-breaking,
she is there to steer you away from sin.
Just stop provoking the spirited archer goddess.
You can still appease her if only you try.
And please stop withering your delicate frame with fevers:
preserve your beauty for me to enjoy.
Preserve all the features born to enflame me,
the delicate blush on your snowy cheek.
May my enemies, and all who would not have me possess you,
suffer as I do when you are ill.
Whether you wed or are ill, I am tormented,
nor can I say which I would wish for less.
I'm consumed by the thought that I'm making you suffer,
that my machinations have injured you.
Let my lady's false oath be upon me is my prayer,
mine be the penalty, and she kept safe!

But so I may not be ignorant of how you are doing,
I often walk anxiously before your door,
following your handmaid or manservant, asking
how your diet and sleep might be helping you.

How I wish I could administer your doctor's orders,
stroke your hands, sit by your bed!
And it pains me more that when I am not near you
another is, the one I would least wish!
He gets to stroke your hands, to sit at your bedside,
hated by me and by the gods above!
And when he uses his thumb to feel your pulse throbbing
he finds an excuse to touch your fair, white arm,
and touches your breast and perhaps bestows kisses.
The pay is too much for a hireling like this!

Who said you could reap my harvests before me?
Who opened a road to another's field?
That bosom is mine! Those are my kisses!
Hands off of a body pledged to me!
Take off your hands! You're touching my woman!
It's adultery if you do that again.
Choose from those who are free, unclaimed by another.
In case you don't know, that one is owned.
If you don't believe me, let her pledge be recited.
And so you will believe, let her read it herself.
Get out, I'm telling you, from another's bedchamber.
This couch is already taken. Just get out!
So you have an agreement with the same wording,
but that doesn't make your case equal to mine.
She pledged herself to me; to you, her father.
He is close to her but not as close as she is.
Her father merely promised; she herself swore to her lover.
His witnesses were men; a goddess was hers.
He fears to be called a liar, she fears to be perjured.
Whose do you think is the greater fear?
Even if you were able to compare their hazards,
look: he is in good health while she lies ill.
And it's with different minds that you and I are contesting:
our hopes are not equal, nor our fears the same.
You have nothing to lose, my loss is worse than dying;
I already love her, you perhaps will.

If you cared for what's right, had any sense of justice,
my passion itself would cause you to cede.

Now, since this beast persists in his iniquity, Cydippe,
to what conclusion should my letter come?
It's his fault you're ill and suspect to Diana.
He's the one you should refuse to admit.
He's the one who has put you in this dire condition,
and he deserves to perish in your place!
Reject him, refuse to love someone damned by the goddess,
and you will have made my welfare secure.
Fear not, maiden! You will long remain healthy
if you honor the shrine that witnessed your pledge.
The heavenly ones are gladdened not by slain oxen,
but by good faith, even unwitnessed, maintained.
Some women are cured by steel or by fire;
bitter potions bring others gruesome aid.
There is no need of these. Just don't make false pledges.
Keep the one you made and save us both!
You have a ready excuse for your past offenses:
you simply forgot the agreement you read.
Only now have you on my part been admonished—
and by illness caused by evading your oath.
And even if you pull through this, will you in childbirth
dare to pray to Diana for aid?
She will recall what she heard, and then she will ask you
from what husband did these birth pangs arise?
You will promise an offering, but she knows not to trust you;
swear, and she will know you lie to the gods.

This is not about me; I have a greater worry.
My anxiety is all on your account.
Why, ignorant of your guilt, did your fearful parents,
wait to weep for you until your life was in doubt?
And why should they be ignorant? You could tell your mother.
You need not blush at what you have done.

Make sure to relate how I first noticed you: while your mother
was sacrificing to the goddess of the bow.
Tell her, if you noticed, that as soon as I saw you,
I stood stock still, my eyes fixed on your limbs.
And how when I gazed too long (a sure sign of madness)
my cloak slipped from my shoulder down to the ground.
And then (how I don't know) came the rolling apple
inscribed with the clever, insidious words.
And how, because they were read before holy Diana—
a divine witness—you were bound by your pledge.
In case she doesn't grasp the inscription's import,
repeat to her the words you once read.
"Marry," she will say, "him to whom the blessed gods join you.
The one you swore to should be my son.
Whoever he is, we approve, since he was picked by Diana!"
Thus your mother will say, if your mother she be.
But have her look into my means and my ancestry.
She will find that the goddess had you at heart.
In the Aegean Sea lies the island of Cea,
once crowded with Corycian nymphs.
That is my homeland, and if you favor high lineage,
I am by no means sprung from lowly stock
We are wealthy and of exemplary reputation,
but beyond all this, Love joined me to you.
Even had you not sworn, you would seek such a husband.
Sworn, you must accept me even were I not.

In my dreams Diana ordered me to write you this letter.
Awake, I took dictation from Love.
The arrows from one of them have left me wounded.
Take care, or the other will wound you too!
Our well-being is joint; have pity on both of us.
Why hesitate to aid us both at once?
If you do, on the day when the horns give the signal
and Delos is stained with sacrificial blood,
a golden image of the blessed apple will be proffered
with its meaning inscribed in two lines of verse:

Acontius testifies by this image of an apple
that what was written on it has now come true.

Lest too long a letter weary your ailing body
and so it may come to an accustomed close:
Farewell!

Heroides XXI: Cydippe to Acontius

Cydippe replies to Acontius, expressing her fears that she has fallen gravely ill because of her failure to uphold the accidental vow.

I was frightened and read your words without a murmur,
lest my oblivious tongue swear oaths by some god.
And I think you would have set another trap, but, you've admitted,
you knew that one promise was enough.
I didn't want to read it, either, but if I had treated you callously,
the savage goddess's rage could have been worse.
Despite all that I have done for Diana, despite all my pious incense,
she still favors you more than is due,
and she avenges you with indelible rage (if we believe you)—
she barely treated her own Hippolytus this way.
It would be better for the virgin goddess to support a virgin's years,
years I fear she wants me to have few.
For I am feeble without discernible reason;
I'm exhausted and no healer brings relief.
How thin do you think I am, as to barely write this letter?
How pale, as to barely lift my limbs?

Now, a fear draws near that someone other than my nursemaid
might learn of our corresponding back and forth.
She sits before my doors, and if they ask what I'm doing,
she says, "She's sleeping!" so I can write in peace.
But soon when sleep, the best excuse for my long absence,
stops working as an alibi for delay,
when she sees the men coming who won't take no for an answer,
she coughs, gives the signal we've rehearsed.
I abandon my unfinished words as they are. The letter
is aborted, squirreled away in my trembling breast.
When it is brought out again, once more it wearies my fingers.
You see how great a labor you are.