



*Selections
from
Metamorphoses*

PUBLIUS OVIDIUS NASO (OVID)



Translation by R. A. Rushing



Pygmalion and Galatea (Book X)

This story is one of the songs that Orpheus sings in his grief after the second death of Eurydice.

Pygmalion lived celibate, without a wife, and for a long time, his bed lacked any partner. Meanwhile, with happy art, he sculpted snow-white ivory and gave it a form like no woman ever born; and so there arose, from his own art, love. Her appearance was that of a true maiden. You might have thought her alive and—if it's no obstacle to modesty—wished her to move. True artistry hides its art. Pygmalion adores that simulated body; his breast is aflame.

Often he moves his hands to feel his own work.
Is this a real body or an ivory one? He doesn't want to admit it might be ivory. He gives it kisses, believes them returned! He speaks, he holds, believes his fingers sink into the limbs he touches, worries that he might bruise them. Now he offers compliments, now he brings her gifts, the kind girls like—shells and polished stones, little birds, flowers of a thousand colors, lilies, painted balls, and

the tears from the tree of the Heliads. He adorns her with clothes, puts jewels on her fingers, a necklace around her neck, bright pearls to her ears. She is no less beautiful than when naked. He places her on a couch dyed indigo, calls her his partner of the marriage-bed, and lays her down on soft pillows as if she could feel.

“tears from
the tree” =
amber

The festival day of Venus, famous in Cyprus, had come. The incense was smoldering when he lingered before the altar and timidly said: “If, gods, you can indeed grant all things, I wish that my wife might be—” but Pygmalion did not say “my ivory maiden,” but rather, “like my ivory girl.” Golden Venus, for she attended her own festival, understood what this prayer really meant and, sign of her agreement, the holy flame was lit thrice, and three times bent its tip.

When Pygmalion returned, he sought out his maiden and, leaning over the marriage-bed, gave her a kiss. She seemed to grow warm. He moved his mouth to her again, and felt her breasts with his hands. Ivory softened to the touch. It gave way to firm pressure, relented to his fingers.

He is amazed and rejoices—dubiously, for he fears he is deceived. The lover touches the object of his prayers again and again. It was indeed flesh and blood! The veins touched by his thumbs pulse. Then truly did he find words with which to thank Venus. At length he covered that fair mouth with his own, and felt himself kissed. Blushing, she lifted up her timid eyes to his.