

TIBULLUS

TRANSLATED BY A. S. KLINE © 2001

[Dr. D's note: These poems and others by Tibullus are taken from [Poetry in Translation](#), where the text has a number of helpful explanatory hyperlinks. If possible, read the poems on that web site, and use this version (1) to note the poems we will discuss and (2) print out for reference in class.]

II. A Plea to Delia

More wine: and let new pain be lessened

by the grape, so that sleep might quell my weary eyes:
and let no one stir my mind numbed with drink
while wretched love is fast asleep.

For a savage guard's been set upon my girl
and the harsh door shut fast with a solid bolt.

Door, of a surly master, may the rain beat on you,
and lightning hurled on Jupiter's orders find you out.

Door, open now, conquered by my complaints alone,
and no sound as you open, turned on a stealthy hinge.

And if my mad passion has ever spoken ill of you
forgive: I pray it might fall on my own head.

It's fitting you should remember what I said many times,
as a suppliant, setting flowery garlands on your posts.

You too, Delia, don't be shy at deceiving the guard.

Be daring: Venus herself assists the brave.

She favours the youth who tries out a new threshold
or the girl who unfastens the door, with the piercing prong:

She teaches how one creeps secretly from a soft bed,
she teaches how to place a foot without a sound,

she assigns speaking gestures in a husband's presence,
and hides words of flattery in unassuming signs.

Not teaching all, but those whom no idleness delays
and whom no fear inhibits from rising at dead of night.

Look, as I wander anxiously through the city in the dark,
Venus ensures my safety in the darkness,

she lets no one attack me who might wound my body,
with his blade, or try and make a prize of my clothes.

Whoever's possessed by love goes safe and holy
wherever he will: he should fear no ambush at all.

The numbing cold of a winter's night brings me no harm
nor the rain showering its vast waters on me.

This labour won't hurt me, if only Delia unlocks the door
and calls me silently with the sound of her tapping.

Hide your eyes, man or woman whom we meet with:
Venus wants her thefts to be concealed.

Don't startle us with clattering feet or ask our names,
 nor bring the light of glowing torches near us.
 If anyone has seen us unawares, let him hide it,
 and deny by all the gods that he remembers.
 Since if any turns informer, he'll find Venus
 is the child of blood and angry seas.
 Still, your husband won't believe them, the truthful witch
 promised me that, with her magic rites.
 I've seen her drawing stars down from the sky:
 her chant turns back the course of the flowing river.
 her spells split the ground, conjure ghosts from the tomb
 and summon dead bones from the glowing funeral pyre:
 now she holds the infernal crew with magic hissing,
 now sprinkling milk orders them to retreat.
 As she wishes, she dispels the cloud from the sombre sky:
 as she wishes, calls up snows to a summer world.
 They say she alone possesses Medea's fatal herbs,
 only she has fully tamed the savage hounds of Hecate.
 She composed a spell for me, that you can deceive with:
 chant it three times, spit three times when you've done.
 Then he'll not be able to believe anyone about us,
 not even himself if he saw us in your soft bed.
 Still you must keep away from others: since he'll see
 all the rest: it's only me he'll see nothing of!
 What? Do I believe? Surely she's the same who said
 she could dissolve my love with herbs or charms,
 and purified me with torches, and in the calm of night
 a mournful sacrifice fell to the gods of sorcery.
 I didn't pray that my love should wholly vanish, but that
 it might be shared, I'd not wish to be without you if I could.
 That man was iron, who when he could have had you,
 stupidly preferred to chase after war and prizes.
 Let him drive Cilicia's conquered crew before him,
 and pitch his camp of war on captured soil,
 let him sit his swift horse, to be gazed at,
 covered all in silver, covered all in gold:
 if only I might yoke the oxen with you Delia,
 and feed the flocks on the usual mount,
 and while I may hold you in my tender arms,
 let soft sleep indeed be mine on the harsh earth.
 What use to lie on a Tyrian bed, without love's favours,
 if night comes with wakefulness and weeping?
 Since then no feather pillows, no embroidered covers,
 no sound of soothing waters brings repose.
 Have I wronged the divinity of mighty Venus with words,
 and does my impious tongue now pay the penalty?
 Can they say now I've sinfully entered the divine sanctuary
 and snatched the garland from the holy altar?

I won't hesitate, if I'm guilty, to kneel in her temple,
 and grant her kisses on her sacred threshold,
 to crawl on my knees, a suppliant, over the ground
 and beat my wretched head against the sacred door.
 But you, who laugh indifferent to my suffering, must soon
 take care yourself: gods do not rage at one alone, forever.
 I have seen one who ridiculed the miseries of young love
 bow his aged neck later in Venus's harness,
 and compose blandishments himself in a quavering voice,
 and seek to dress his white hair with his own hands:
 and not be ashamed to stand before his dear girl's door,
 and stop her maid in the middle of the forum.
 Around him young men and boys crowded closely,
 and each one spat in his own tender breast.
 But spare me, Venus: my devoted heart always serves you:
 why in your bitterness burn your own harvest?

VI Faithlessness

Always you meet me with seductive looks, Love,
 to lead me on, but later you're wretchedly sad and bitter.
 Cruel power, what have you to do with me? What glory
 is it for a god to set out snares for a man?
 For the net's spread for me: now cunning Delia
 fondles someone secretly in the dead of night.
 Of course she denies it, swears it, but it's hard to believe:
 she's always denying me in that way to her husband.
 I myself, wretch, taught her, the means of eluding
 her guards: alas, now I'm crushed by my own art.
 Then she learnt how to make excuses for sleeping alone,
 then how to turn the door on its hinges silently:
 then I gave her juices and herbs to erase the bruises
 that mutual lovemaking makes out of teeth-marks.
 But you, deceived husband of a faithless wife,
 watching me too, that she might never sin,
 be careful she doesn't sit talking much with young men
 or recline with loose dress and throat bared,
 or deceive you with nods, or wet her finger with wine
 and trace messages over the table's surface.
 Fear, when she goes out often, or says she'll go see
 the rites of the Good Goddess that no man can go near.
 But trust her to me, I'll follow her to that altar alone:
 then I'll have no reason to fear for my sight.
 Often, I remember touching her hand, as if I were
 examining her jewel's design, an excuse.
 Often, I sent you to sleep with wine, while I, the winner,
 drank from a sober glass of counterfeit water.
 I'm not aware I harmed you: forgive, now I confess,

Love told me to. Who takes up weapons against a god?
 It was me, and I'm not ashamed to tell the truth now,
 at whom your dog barked the whole night through.
 What use is a tender wife to you? If you don't know
 how to guard your goods, the key for the lock's in vain.
 She holds you, she sighs for other absent lovers
 and suddenly she pretends to a raging headache.
 But trust her to my keeping: then I'll not refuse
 blows, or shrink from chains on my ankles.
 Away from me then, you who dress your hair with skill,
 and whose roomy togas flow with loosened folds:
 and whoever meets us, so that he might be sinless,
 let him stand far off, or go by on another road.
 The god himself orders it done, this the great priestess
 prophesied to me, with a voice divine.
 She, when she's inspired by Bellona's power, fears
 no fierce flames, in her madness, nor the twisted lash:
 she slashes her arms fiercely with the double-axe
 and, unharmed, sprinkles the goddess with flowing blood,
 stands there with a spear in her side, wounds on her breast,
 and chants the fate that the great goddess proclaims:
 "Beware lest you harm the girl whom Love protects,
 and regret being taught a harsh lesson afterwards.
 Who touches her, his wealth will drain away, like blood
 from a wound, as these ashes are scattered by the wind."
 And she named a punishment for you, my Delia:
 if you still sin, I beg she'll be merciful.
 I don't spare you for yourself, but your old mother
 moves me and her lovely old-age overcomes anger.
 She brings me to you in the darkness, and fearfully
 joins our hands together, secretly, silently:
 she waits for me, glued to the door, at night
 and knows the sound of my nearing feet far off.
 Live long for me, sweet lady: I'd give you my years
 to add to your own if that were allowed.
 I'll love you always, and your daughter for your sake:
 whatever she does, she's still of your blood.
 Teach her to be chaste, though no headband tied there
 constrains her hair, nor a long robe her feet.
 And for me let the rules be harsh, let me never be able
 to praise anyone without the girl going for my eyes:
 and if I'm thought to have sinned, let me be led by the hair
 and dragged face down in the middle of the street.
 I wouldn't wish to strike you Delia, and if such a madness
 came to me, I'd rather choose to have no hands.
 Don't be chaste from cruel fear, but a loyal mind:
 let mutual love guard you for me in my absence.
 But she who was loyal to none, when age has conquered,

helpless, draws out the twisted thread with trembling hand
 and ties the fastenings tight to the loom, for hire,
 and counts what's pulled and drawn from the snowy fleece.
 The crowd of youths see her with joyful hearts,
 and say her old age deserves to bear such suffering.
 Venus, sublime, looks down from high Olympus
 at her weeping, and warns how fierce she is to the faithless.
 Let these curses fall on others, Delia: let us two
 be a pattern for lovers when our hair is white.

IX Treacherous Love

If you were to wound my wretched love, why did you give
 me your word before the gods, only to break it secretly?
 Ah sadly, even if perjury is hidden at first,
 punishment will come later, on silent feet.
 Spare him, gods: it's right that beauty should offend
 your divinity, once, and go unpunished.
 The farmer yokes his bulls to the useful plough
 and works the land hard in search of profit:
 fixed stars guide the swaying ships, through seas
 obedient to the winds, in search of profit.
 My lad's captivated by gifts. But may the god
 turn those gifts to ashes or running water.
 Soon he'll make amends: dust will take his beauty
 and his hair will be entangled by the winds:
 his face will be burned, his tresses burned by the sun,
 and the long road will blister his tender feet.
 How many times have I warned him: "Don't let gold
 sully your beauty: many evils often lurk beneath the gold.
 Venus is bitter and difficult with anyone
 who violates love, captivated by wealth.
 Scorch my head with fire instead, attack my body
 with steel, and scar my back with the twisted lash.
 Don't hope to conceal it when you're planning sin:
 the god knows, who forbids wrongs to be hidden.
 The god himself has often allowed a silent servant
 to babble freely due to strong drink.
 The god himself has ordered a voice subdued by sleep
 to speak and tell unwillingly of things better buried."
 This I said to you: now I'm ashamed that I wept
 as I spoke, and stretched myself out at your tender feet.
 Then you swore to me you'd not sell your loyalty
 for measures of rich gold nor for jewels,
 not if Campania's land was given you as a prize,
 or the Falernian fields that Bacchus cares for.
 Those words could have robbed me of thinking the stars
 shine in the sky, and rivers flow down to the sea.

You even wept: but I unskilled in deceit, fondly
 wiped the wetness continually from your cheeks.
 What might I do if you were not yourself in love
 with a girl: I beg she might be fickle, given your example.
 Oh how often, your friend indeed, I carried the bright light
 at night, so no one should be aware of your words.
 Often, through my doing, she came when unexpected
 and hid herself, veiled, behind the closed doors.
 Then I was lost, sad wretch, foolishly trusting in love:
 now I might be wariest of your snares.
 My stunned heart even sang your praises:
 but now I'm ashamed for myself and the Muses.
 May Vulcan scorch those songs now, with swift fire,
 and the river wash them away in its clear waters.
 Go far off from here, you whose aim is to sell your beauty
 and to return with a great handful of gifts.
 And you who dare to corrupt the boy with rewards,
 let your wife, unpunished, mock with her constant intrigues,
 and when she's tired her lover with their secret doings,
 let her lie sleepily with you, with the sheet between.
 Let there always be strange traces in your bed
 and your house always be wide open to lovers:
 don't let it be said her wanton sister drinks more
 in her cups, or wears out more men.
 They say she often leads on the party with wine
 till the wheels of Lucifer rise to call up the day:
 no one spends the night better than she does,
 or better arranges the various modes of leisure.
 And your wife has learnt it all: and you don't notice,
 idiot, when she moves her body with unusual art.
 Do you think she dresses her hair for you,
 combs her fine tresses with the thin-toothed steel?
 Is it your beauty persuades her to circle her arms with gold
 and appear abroad dressed in Tyrian robes?
 She wants to seem beautiful for a certain boy, not you:
 she'd give up all your house and things for him.
 She does it not from vice, but the sensitive girl shrinks
 from a body marred by gout and an old man's arms.
 Yet my boy has slept with him: now I'll believe
 the lad could join in union with a savage beast.
 Mad boy, did you dare to sell my caresses to others,
 and carry my kisses to other men as well?
 Weep then when another lad has captivated me
 and spends his proud reign in your kingdom.
 I'll joy then in your punishment. And to deserving Venus
 a golden-palm tree shall be raised, marking my fate:

TIBULLUS WHOM THE GODDESS FREED FROM FAITHLESS LOVE
OFFERS THIS AND ASKS HER TO BE GRATEFUL TO HIM IN SPIRIT

IV Her Greed

Here I see mistress and slavery ready for me:

farewell now to the freedom of my fathers.
I'm given to sad slavery, held by chains,
and Love never slackens my wretched bonds,
but burns me whether I merit it or I'm sinless.
Oh, I burn: cruel girl remove the flame.
O not to be able to feel such pain,
how much better to be a stone on the frozen hills,
or stand, a rock, exposed to the void of winds,
on which the shipwrecked wave of the vast sea breaks.
Now the day is bitter, the shadows of night more bitter:
now every moment's soaked in acerbic gall.
Verse is no help, nor Apollo who inspires my song:
her hollow palm is always demanding gifts.
Vanish Muses, if you'll give no help to lovers:
I don't cultivate you so warfare can be sung,
nor do I tell the journeys of the Sun, nor how the Moon
wheels her horses and returns, her circuit done.
I seek by song to gain easy access to my mistress:
Vanish, Muses, if the thing is of no use.
I need to acquire gifts for you by crimes and slaughter,
so as not to lie weeping before your closed house:
or snatch the ornaments that hang in sacred temples:
But Venus's before all others is for me to pillage.
She urges me on to wicked crimes and grants me
a greedy mistress: let her feel my sacrilegious hands.
Oh let whoever gathers the deep green emeralds perish,
or dyes the snowy fleece with Tyrian purples.
Silks of Cos and bright pearls from the Red Sea
are the cause of greed in girls.
They make them wicked: because of them the door
knows the key, and the dog's set to guard the threshold.
But if you bear great gifts the watchman's conquered,
keys don't prevent it, the very dog is silent.
Ah, whichever god gave beauty to the greedy girl,
what good he brought wholly to grief!
From it weeping and squabbling rises, in short it's why
the God of Love wanders now in infamy.
And you, who shut out lovers, beaten by gifts,
may wind and flame snatch away your wealth.
May the young men delight in seeing the blaze,
and no one busy themselves throwing water on the fire.
Or if death comes to you, let there be none to weep,

or bring gifts to your mournful funeral.
 But she who's kind, not greedy, let her live
 a hundred years, to be wept for by the burning pyre:
 And some aged man in homage to his past love
 will yearly set a garland on her heaped tomb,
 and, as he leaves, will say: "Sleep well, and sleep in peace,
 and on your untroubled ashes may the earth lie light."
 I give true warning, but what use is truth to me?
 My love's to be cherished as she ordains.
 Why, even if she ordered me to sell my ancestral home,
 you Lares must go under the hammer, at her command.
 Let Nemesis mix whatever drugs Circe or Medea possess,
 and whatever herbs the earth of Thessaly bears,
 that fluid that drips from the vulva of a mare on heat
 when Venus breathes passion into the wild herd,
 and a thousand other herbs, if only she'll look
 with kindness on me, I will drink.

VI Love's Compulsion

Macer is off to the camp: what will happen to tender Love?

Will he go too, and bravely carry weapons round his neck?
 And will he go, with his sword, by the warrior's side,
 whether the way leads over distant lands or restless seas?
 Boy, brand the savage, I beg, who's broken your peace
 and call the straggler back to your standard again.
 But if you spare soldiers, well then, here's a soldier too,
 who'd carry sweet water for himself in his helmet.
 I'm off to camp, goodbye Venus, goodbye girls:
 I'm tough too, for me too the trumpet was created.
 Brave speech, but when I've uttered the proud boast
 the door closing dashes the bold words from my lips.
 How often have I sworn never to return to her threshold?
 For all the fine oaths, my feet return themselves.
 Fierce Love, I wish, if were it possible, your weapons
 could be broken, your arrows destroyed, torches quenched.
 You torment the wretched, you force me to curse myself,
 and utter wickedness from my maddened spirit.
 I'd already have ended my ills in death, but hope,
 believing, fuels life, saying, ever, tomorrow will be better.
 Hope nourishes the farmer, hope entrusts the seed
 to the ploughed furrows to be returned with interest:
 it takes the bird in the noose, the fish with the rod,
 after the slender hook's first hidden by the bait:
 hope even consoles the slave bound with strong chains:
 his legs are struck by the iron, but he sings at his labour:
 hope promises Nemesis will be kind: but she declines.
 Ah me, harsh girl don't deny the goddess. Spare me,

I pray, by the bones of your sister dead before her time:
so may the little one sleep in peace beneath the gentle earth.
To me she's sacred: I'll bring gifts and garlands
wet with my tears, to her grave. I'll hurry
to her tomb, and sitting there as a suppliant
I'll lament my fate to her silent dust.
She won't always suffer your follower to weep near you:
in her name, don't be cold towards me,
lest her spirit slighted sends you evil dreams, and, in sleep,
your sorrowful sister stands before your bed,
such as she was when falling from that high window
she went headlong, blood-spattered, to the lakes below.
I'll say no more, lest I stir my lady's bitter grief,
I'm not worthy enough that she should ever weep.
Nor should tears disfigure those speaking eyes:
the go-between harms me, the girl herself is good.
Phryne, the bawd, denies me, alas, as she comes and goes
secretly hiding the letters she carries in her bosom.
Often when I recognise my lady's sweet voice
from the cruel threshold, the go-between denies she's home:
often, when the night's been promised me, she declares
the girl is ill or has been frightened by some warning.
Then I die with anxiety, then my wild mind imagines
who embraces my love, and in what ways:
then I call curses down on you, procurress: you'll live
anxiously enough if any part of my prayer stirs the gods.