

Invocation

My mind now turns to stories of bodies changed
 Into new forms. O Gods, inspire my beginnings
 (For you changed them too) and spin a poem that extends
 From the world's first origins down to my own time.

Origin of the World

Before there was land or sea or overarching sky,
 Nature's face was one throughout the universe,
 Chaos as they call it: a crude, unsorted mass,
 Nothing but an inert lump, the concentrated,
 Discordant seeds of disconnected entities.
 No Titan Sun as yet gave light to the world, 10
 No Phoebe touched up her crescent horns by night,
 Not yet did Earth hang nested in air, balanced
 By her own weight, and Amphitrite had not yet
 Stretched her arms around the world's long shores.
 Yes, there was land around, and sea and air,
 But land impossible to walk, unnavigable water,
 Lightless air; nothing held its shape,
 And each thing crowded the other out. In one body
 Cold wrestled with hot, wet with dry,
 Soft with hard, and weightless with heavy. 20

Some god, or superior nature, settled this conflict, ←
 Splitting earth from heaven, sea from earth,
 And the pure sky from the dense atmosphere.
 After he carved these out from the murky mass,
 In peaceful concord he bound each in its place.
 The fiery, weightless energy of the convex sky
 Shot to the zenith and made its home there.
 The air, next in levity, was next in location,
 Then the denser earth attracted the heavier elements
 And was pushed down by her own weight. The circling sea 30
 Settled down at her edges, confining the solid orb.

Then, the god who had sorted out this cosmic heap,
 Whoever it was, and divided it into parts,
 First rolled the earth, so it would not appear
 Asymmetrical, into the shape of a great sphere;
 And then he ordered the sea to flood and swell
 Beneath high winds until it lapped the planet's shores.
 He threw in springs and immense wetlands,
 Lakes and rivers, which he channeled in sloping banks
 So some are absorbed by the land itself, while others cascade 40
 Into the sea, where received at last into open water
 They beat no longer against banks but shores.
 He also ordered the prairies to stretch, the valleys to sink,
 The woods to take leaf, rocky mountains to rise.
 And as two zones belt the sky on the right,
 Two on the left, and a fifth burns in the middle,
 This providential god marked the globe beneath
 With these same five zones, so that of the earth's regions
 The middle is too hot for habitation,
 Deep snow covers two, but the two wedged between 50
 Have a climate that tempers heat with cold.

Hanging above is the air, as much heavier
 Than fire as water is lighter than earth.
 The god ordained mist and clouds to form there,
 And thunder that would make human minds tremble,
 And winds too, gusting with thunder and lightning.
 The World's Fabricator did not allow the winds
 Free rein in the air. He barely controls them now,
 When each must blow in his own tract of heaven,
 Else they would shred the world with their fraternal strife. 60
 Eurus receded to the East and the Nabataean realms,
 To Persia and its ridges bathed in morning light.
 Evening, and the shores warmed by the setting sun,
 Are nearest to Zephyrus. Bristling Boreas
 Invaded Scythia and the Arctic stars. The land
 Due south drips with Auster's constant mist and rain.
 Above all these he put the liquid, weightless
 Aether, which has nothing of earthly dregs.

The deity had just finished zoning off everything
 When the stars, which had long been smothered 70
 In dark vapor, peeked out and glowed all over the sky.
 And so that no region would be without living things
 Of its own, constellations and the forms of gods
 Possessed heaven's floor; the sea allowed itself
 To swarm with glistening fish, the land became
 A wild kingdom, and the air teemed with wings.

Still missing was a creature finer than these,
 With a greater mind, one who could rule the rest:
 Man was born, whether fashioned from immortal seed
 By the Master Artisan who made this better world, 80
 Or whether Earth, newly parted from Aether above
 And still bearing some seeds of her cousin Sky,
 Was mixed with rainwater by Titan Prometheus
 And molded into the image of the omnipotent gods.
 And while other animals look on all fours at the ground
 He gave to humans an upturned face, and told them to lift
 Their eyes to the stars. And so Earth, just now barren,
 A wilderness without form, was changed and made over,
 Dressing herself in the unfamiliar figures of men.

Human

The Four Ages

Golden was the first age, a generation 90
 That cultivated trust and righteousness
 All on its own, without any laws, without fear
 Or punishment. There were no threatening rules
 Stamped on bronze tablets, no crowds of plaintiffs
 Cowering before judges: no one needed protection.
 Not a pine was cut from its native mountain
 To be launched on a maritime tour of the world;
 Mortal men knew no shores but their own.
 Steep trenches around cities were still in the future;
 There were no bronze bugles, no curved, blaring horns, 100
 No helmets or swords. Without a military
 A carefree people enjoyed a life of soft ease.

The inviolate earth, untouched by hoes, still
 Unwounded by plows, bore fruit all on its own,
 And content with food unforced by labor
 Men gathered arbut, mountain strawberries,
 Wild cherries, blackberries clinging to brambles,
 And acorns that fell from Jove's spreading oaks.
 Spring was eternal, and mild westerly breezes
 Soughed among flowers sown from no seed. 110
 Even uncultivated the soil soon bore crops
 And fields unfallowed grew white with deep grain.
 Rivers flowed with milk, streams ran with nectar,
 And honey dripped tawny from the green holm oak.

After Saturn was consigned to Tartarus' gloom
 The world was under Jove, and the Silver race came in,
 Cheaper than gold but more precious than bronze.
 Jupiter curtailed the old season of spring
 And by adding cold and heat and autumn's changes 120
 To a brief spring, made the year turn through its four seasons.
 For the first time the air, parched and feverish,
 Began to burn, and icicles now hung frozen in wind.
 People now took shelter; their houses were caves,
 Dense thickets, and branches bound together with bark.
 Cereal seeds now lay buried, sown in long furrows,
 And for the first time oxen groaned under the yoke.

The next and third generation was Bronze,
 Harsher in its genius and more ready to arms,
 Not wicked however.

The fourth and last is Iron.

Every iniquity burst out in this inferior age. 130
 Shame and Veracity and Faith took flight,
 And in their place came Duplicity and Fraud,
 Treachery and Force, and unholy Greed.
 They spread sails to the winds still a mystery
 To sailors, and keels that once stood high in the mountains
 Now surged and bucked in unfamiliar waves.
 The cautious surveyor now marks off the fields

Once held in common like the sunlight and air.
 And the rich earth is not only required to produce
 Crops and food: now her bowels are tunneled, 140
 And the ore she'd sequestered in Stygian darkness
 Is now dug up as wealth that incites men to crime.
 Iron with its injuries and more injurious gold
 Now came forth, and War, equipped with both of these metals,
 Brandishes clashing weapons in bloodstained hands.
 Plunder sustains life; guest is not safe from host,
 Or a father safe from his daughter's husband;
 Gratitude is rare even among brothers. Husbands
 Can't wait for their wives to die, wives reciprocate,
 Frightful stepmothers brew their aconite, and sons 150
 Inquire prematurely into their father's age.
 Piety lies beaten, and when the other gods are gone,
 Virgin Astraea abandons the bloodstained earth.

The Giants //

And, so the lofty sky would not be safer than earth,
 They say the Giants went after the kingdom of heaven,
 Piling up mountains all the way to the stars.
 Then the Father Almighty shattered Olympus
 With a well-aimed thunderbolt and blasted away Pelion
 From Ossa beneath. When the Giants' dread corpses
 Lay crushed beneath their own bulk, they say Mother Earth, 160
 Drenched with her sons' blood, reanimated
 Their steaming gore, and to preserve the memory
 Of her former brood, gave it a human form.
 But this incarnation also was contemptuous
 Of the gods, with a deep instinct for slaughter,
 And violent. You could tell they were sons of blood.

The Council of the Gods

Jupiter, seeing this from his high throne, groaned.
 He recalled, too, the sordid dinner parties of Lycaon,
 Too recent for the story to be well-known, and conceived

10 BOOK I
In his heart a mighty wrath worthy of the soul of Jove.
He called a council, and none of the gods were late.

170

On a clear night you can see a road in the sky
Called the Milky Way, renowned for its white glow.
This is the road the gods take to the royal palace
Of the great Thunderer. To the right and the left
The halls of the divine nobility, doors flung open,
Are thronged with guests. The plebeian gods
Live in a different neighborhood, but the great
All have their homes along this avenue. This quarter,
If I may say so, is high heaven's Palatine.

180

So, when the gods had been seated in a marble chamber,
The God himself, enthroned high above the rest, leaning
On his ivory scepter, shook three times, four times,
The dread locks whereby he moves land, sea, and stars.
And opening his indignant lips, he spoke in this way:

"I was not more concerned than I am now
For the world when the serpentine Giants threatened
To get their hundred hands on the captured sky.
Although the enemy was brutal, that war at least
Stemmed from a united body and single source.
But now, wherever old Nereus' ocean roars,
The human race must be destroyed. By the river
That glides through the underworld grove of Styx,
I swear that I have already tried everything else,
But gangrenous flesh must be cut away with a knife
Before it infects the rest. I have demigods to protect
And rustic deities—nymphs, fauns, satyrs,
And sylvan spirits on the mountainsides.
Although we do not deem them worthy of heaven,
We should at least let them live in their allotted lands.
Do you think they will be safe there, I ask you,
When even against me, who rule you gods,
Snares are laid by the infamous Lycaon?"

200

The gods all trembled and zealously demanded
The traitor's head. So it was when a disloyal few
Were mad to blot out Rome with Caesar's blood,
And the human race was stunned with fear of ruin
And the whole world shuddered. The loyalty
Of your subjects, Augustus, pleases you no less
Than Jove was pleased. With word and gesture
He stilled the crowd, and when the clamor
Had been suppressed by his royal gravitas,
Jove once more broke the silence, saying:

Wickedness.

210

"He has paid the penalty—of that you can be sure—
But listen to what he did, and hear his punishment.

Lycaon

The infamy of the age had reached my ears,
And hoping to discover the report was false, I slipped down
From Olympus, a god disguised as a human,
And crisscrossed the land. There is not time to do justice
To the catalog of iniquity I found everywhere.
The report fell short of the truth. I had traversed
Mount Maenala, its thickets bristling with animal lairs,
Crossed Cyllene, and Lycaeus' cold pine forests,
And was coming up to the Arcadian tyrant's
Inhospitable hall as the late evening shadows
Ushered in the night. I gave a sign that a god had come,
And the common people began to pray. Lycaon
Started by mocking their pieties, and then said,
'I'll find out if this is a mortal or a god. A simple test
Will establish the truth beyond any doubt.'
The test of truth he had in mind was to murder me
While I was fast asleep. And not content with that,
He slit the throat of a Molossian hostage,
Boiled some of his half-dead flesh and roasted the rest.
As soon as he set this delicate dish before me,
My avenging lightning brought down the house
On its master and his all-too-deserving household.

220

*Just the
Gods.*
230

He fled in terror, and when he reached the silent fields
 He let loose a howl. He tried to speak but could not.
 His mouth foamed, and he turned his usual bloodlust 240
 Against a flock of sheep, still relishing slaughter.
 His clothes turned into a shaggy pelt, his arms into legs.
 He became a wolf, but still retains some traces
 Of his former looks. There is the same grey hair,
 The same savage face; the same eyes gleam,
 And the same overall sense of bestiality.
 Only one house has fallen, yet more than one
 Has deserved perdition. Erinys, the wild Fury,
 Reigns supreme to the ends of the earth. You would think
 They were sworn in blood to a life of crime! Let them all 250
 Pay quickly the price they deserve—this is my edict.”

Some of the gods voiced their approval and even
 Goaded him on, while others playacted their silent consent,
 But they all winced on the inside at the impending loss
 Of the human race and wondered out loud
 What the world would be without men. Who would bring
 Incense to their altars? Was Jupiter planning
 To deliver the world to the depredations of beasts?
 The master of the universe told them to let him
 Worry about all that, and he promised them a new race, 260
 Different from the first, from a wondrous origin.

Self interest:
 No fire. The Flood

He was poised to hurl volleys of thunderbolts
 All over the world, but he backed off in sudden fear
 That the conflagration might kindle the sacred aether
 And set the long axis on fire from pole to pole.
 He recalled, too, that a time was fated to come
 When land and sea and heaven's majestic roof
 Would catch fire, and the foundations of the world
 Would go up in flames. So he laid aside
 The weapons forged by Cyclopean hands 270

And chose instead a different punishment:
 To overwhelm humanity with an endless deluge
 Pouring down from every square inch of sky.

So he shut up the North Wind in Aeolus' cave
 Along with every breeze that disperses clouds.
 But he cut loose the South Wind, which scudded out
 On dripping wings, scowling in pitch-black mist,
 His beard sodden with rain, his white hair
 Streaming water, clouds nesting on his forehead,
 And dew glistening on all his feathers and robes. 280
 The flat of his hand presses low-hanging clouds
 And rain crashes down from the sky. Then Iris,
 Juno's rainbowed messenger, draws up more water
 To feed the lowering clouds. Crops farmers prayed for
 Are beaten flat; years of hard work are all blotted out.

Jove's wrath was not content with his own sky's water,
 So his sea-blue brother rolled out auxiliary waves.
 The Rivers jumped to formation in their tyrant's palace
 And he gave his command:

“My brief to you is to pour forth
 Everything you have. This is a crisis. Open wide 290
 Your doors and dikes and give your streams free rein!”

The Rivers returned, uncurbed their springs,
 And tumbled unbridled down to the sea.

Neptune himself struck the Earth with his trident;
 She trembled, and split mouths wide open for geysers,
 And the Rivers spread out over the open plains,
 Sweeping away orchards and crops, cattle and men,
 Houses and shrines and the shrines' sacred objects.
 If any houses were able to resist this disaster
 And still stood, the waves soon covered their roofs,
 And towers were submerged beneath the flood.
 And now sea and land could not be distinguished.
 All was sea, but it was a sea without shores. 300

Here's a man on a hilltop, and one in his curved skiff,
 Rowing where just yesterday he plowed. Another one
 Sails over acres of wheat or the roof of his farmhouse
 Deep underwater. Here's someone catching a fish
 In the top of an elm. Sometimes an anchor
 Sticks in a green meadow, or keels brush the tops
 Of vineyards beneath. Where slender goats once browsed 310
 Seals now flop their misshapen bodies. Nereids gape
 At houses, cities, and groves undersea,
 And dolphins cruise through forest canopies,
 Grazing the oak trees with their flippers and tails.
 Wolves swim with sheep, tawny lions and tigers
 Tread the same currents. The boar's lightning tusks
 And the stag's speed are useless as the torrent
 Sweeps them away. With no land in sight, no place to perch
 The exhausted bird drops into the sea,
 Whose unbridled license has buried the hills 320
 And now pounds mountaintops with unfamiliar surf.
 Most creatures drown. Those spared by the water
 Finally succumb to slow starvation.

Deucalion and Pyrrha

Phocis is a land that separates Boeotia
 From Oetaea, a fertile land while it was still land,
 But now it was part of the sea, a great plain
 Of flood water. There is a steep mountain there
 With twin peaks stretching up through the clouds
 To the high stars. Its name is Parnassus.
 When Deucalion and his wife landed here 330
 In their little skiff (water covered everything else)
 They first paid a visit to the Corycian nymphs,
 The mountain gods, and Themis, who was the oracle then.
 There was no man better or more just than he,
 And no woman revered the gods more than she.
 When Jupiter saw the whole world reduced
 To a stagnant pond, and from so many thousands
 Only one man left, from so many thousands

Only one woman, each innocent, each reverent,
 He parted the clouds, and when the North Wind 340
 Had swept them away, he once again showed
 The earth to the sky, and the heavens to the earth.
 The sea's roiling anger subsided, as Neptune
 Lay down his trident and soothed the waves. He hailed
 Cerulean Triton rising over the crests,
 His shoulders encrusted with purple shellfish,
 And told him to blow his winding horn
 To signal the floods and streams to withdraw.
 Old Triton lifted the hollow, spiraling shell
 Whose sound fills the shores on both sides of the world 350
 When he gets his lungs into it out in mid-ocean.
 When this horn touched the sea god's lips, streaming
 With brine from his dripping beard, and sounded the retreat,
 It was heard by all the waters of land and sea,
 And all the waters that heard were held in check.
 Now the sea had a shore, rivers flowed in channels,
 The floods subsided, and hills emerged into view.
 The land rose up; locales took shape as waters shrank,
 And at long last the trees bared their leafy tops,
 Foliage still spattered with mud left by the flood. 360

The world was restored. But when Deucalion saw
 It was an empty world, steeped in desolate silence,
 Tears welled up in his eyes as he said to Pyrrha,

"My wife and sister, the last woman alive,
 Our common race, our family, our marriage bed
 And now our perils themselves have united us.
 In all the lands from sunrise to sunset
 We two are the whole population; the sea holds the rest.
 And our lives are far from guaranteed. These clouds 370
 Still strike terror in my heart. Poor soul,
 What would you feel like now if the Fates
 Had taken me and left you behind? How could you bear
 Your fear alone? Who would comfort your grief?
 You can be sure that if the sea already held you,

I would follow you, my wife, beneath the sea.
 Oh, if only I could restore the people of the world
 By my father's arts, breathe life into molded clay!
 Now the human race rests on the two of us.
 We are, by the gods' will, the last of our kind."

He spoke and wept. Their best recourse was to implore 380
 The divine, to beg for help through sacred prophecy.
 So they went side by side to the stream of Cephisus,
 Which, though not yet clear, flowed in its old banks.
 They scooped up some water, sprinkled their heads and clothes,
 And made their familiar way to the sacred shrine
 Of the goddess. The gables were stained with slime and mold,
 And the altars stood abandoned without any fires.
 When they reached the temple steps, husband and wife
 Prostrated themselves, kissed the cold stone trembling,
 And said, "If divine hearts can be softened by prayers 390
 Of the just, if the wrath of the gods can be deflected,
 Tell us, O Themis, how our race can be restored,
 And bring aid, O most mild one, to a world overwhelmed."

The goddess, moved, gave this oracular response:

“Leave this temple. Veil your heads, loosen your robes,
 And throw behind your back your great mother's bones.”

They stood there, dumbfounded. It was Pyrrha
 Who finally broke the silence, refusing to obey
 The commands of the goddess. She prays for pardon
 With trembling lips, but trembles all over 400
 At the thought of offending her mother's shades
 By tossing her bones. Stalling for time,
 The pair revisit the oracle's words, turning them
 Over and over in their minds, searching out
 Their dark secrets. At last Prometheus' son
 Comforts the daughter of Epimetheus
 With these soothing words:

“Either I'm mistaken

Or—since oracles are holy and never counsel evil—
 Our great mother is Earth, and stones in her soil
 Are the bones we are told to throw behind our backs.” 410

Pyrrha was moved by her husband's surmise,
 But the pair still were not sure that they trusted
 The divine admonition. On the other hand,
 What harm was there in trying? Down they go,
 Veiling their heads, untying their robes, and throwing stones
 Behind them just as the goddess had ordered.
 And the stones began (who would believe it
 Without the testimony of antiquity?)
 To lose their hardness, slowly softening
 And assuming shapes. When they had grown and taken on 420
 A milder nature, a certain resemblance
 To human form began to be discernible,
 Not well defined, but like roughed-out statues.
 The parts that were damp with earthy moisture
 Became bodily flesh; the rigid parts became bones;
 And the veins remained without being renamed.
 In no time at all, by divine power, the stones
 Thrown by the man's hand took the form of men
 And from the woman's scattered stones women were born.
 And so we are a tough breed, used to hard labor, 430
 And we are living proof of our origin.

Earth herself spontaneously generated
 Various other species of animals.
 The sun warmed the moisture left from the flood,
 Slime in the swamps swelled with the heat,
 And seeds of life, nourished in that rich soil
 As in a mother's womb, slowly gestated and took on
 Distinctive forms. It was just as when the Nile,
 With its seven mouths, withdraws from the flooded fields
 Into its old channel, and then the Dog Star bakes 440
 The plains of soft muck, and farmers turning over the clods
 Find many animate things, some just on the verge
 Of new life, some unfinished and just budding limbs,

And sometimes they see in the very same body
 A part living and breathing, and a part still raw earth.
 For when heat and moisture combine, they conceive,
 And all things are born from their blended union.
 And though fire fights water, moist vapor is fecund,
 And this discordant concord is pregnant with life.
 So when Mother Earth's diluvian mud
 Again grew warm under the rays of the sun,
 She brought forth innumerable species, restoring some
 Of the ancient forms, and creating some new and strange.

450

Python

She would have rather not, but Earth begot you then,
 O Python, greatest of serpents and never before seen,
 And a terror to the new people, sprawling over
 Half a mountainside. The god of the bent bow
 Destroyed him with weapons never used before
 Except against does and wild goats on the run,
 Nearly emptying his quiver of arrows,
 And venom oozed from the monster's black wounds.
 And so Time would not tarnish the fame of this deed
 He founded sacred games for the crowds, called Pythian
 From the name of the serpent he had overcome.
 Here every youth who won with his fists or his feet,
 Or his chariot, received a garland of oak leaves.
 There was no laurel yet, and Apollo wreathed
 His brow and the gorgeous locks of his hair
 With a garland from whatever species of tree.

460

Apollo and Daphne

Apollo's first love was Daphne, Peneus' daughter,
 Not by blind chance but because Cupid was angry.
 Flush with his victory over Python, the Delian god
 Saw him stringing and flexing his bow, and said:

470

"What do you think you're doing, you little imp,
 With a man's weapons? That archery set

Belongs on my shoulders. I can take dead aim
 Against wild beasts, I can wound my enemies,
 And just now I laid low in a shower of arrows
 Swollen Python and left his noxious belly
 Spread out over acres. You should be satisfied
 With using your torch to inflame people with love
 And stop laying claim to glory that is mine."

480

The son of Venus replied:

"Phoebus, your arrows
 May hit everything else, but mine will hit you.
 And as much as animals are inferior to gods,
 So is my glory superior to yours."

He spoke

And, beating his wings with a vengeance, landed
 On the shady peak of Parnassus. He stood there,
 And drew from his quiver two quite different arrows,
 One that dispels love and one that impels it.
 The latter is golden with a sharp glistening point,
 The former blunt with a shaft made of lead.
 The god struck the nymph with arrow number two
 And feathered the first deep into Apollo's marrow.

490

One now loved, the other fled love's very name,
 Delighting in the deep woods, wearing the skins
 Of animals she caught, modeling herself
 On the virgin Diana, her tussled hair tied back.
 She had many suitors but could not endure men,
 So she turned them away, and roamed the pathless woods
 Without a thought of Hymen, or Amor, or marriage.
 Her father often said, "You owe me a son-in-law, girl."
 Often observed, "You owe me grandchildren, my daughter."
 But she hated the wedding torch like sin itself
 And her beautiful face would blush with shame
 As she hung from his neck with coaxing arms, saying,

500

"O Papa, please, won't you let me enjoy
 My virginity forever? Diana's father let her."