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BOOK I

My intention is to tell of bodies changed
To different forms; the gods, who made the changes,
Will help me—or I hope so—with a poem
That runs from the world's beginning to our own days.

The Creation

• Before the ocean was, or earth, or heaven,
Nature was all alike, a shapelessness,
Chaos, so-called, all rude and lumpy matter,
Nothing but bulk, inert, in whose confusion
Discordant atoms warred: there was no sun
To light the universe; there was no moon
With slender silver crescents filling slowly;
No earth hung balanced in surrounding air;
No sea reached far along the fringe of shore.
Land, to be sure, there was, and air, and ocean,
But land on which no man could stand, and water
No man could swim in, air no man could breathe,
Air without light, substance forever changing,
Forever at war: within a single body
Heat fought with cold, wet fought with dry, the hard
Fought with the soft, things having weight contended

With weightless things.

Till God, or kindlier Nature,
Settled all argument, and separated
Heaven from earth, water from land, our air
From the high stratosphere, a liberation
So things evolved, and out of blind confusion
Found each its place, bound in eternal order.
The force of fire, that weightless element,
Leaped up and claimed the highest place in heaven;
Below it, air; and under them the earth
Sank with its grosser portions; and the water,
Lowest of all, held up, held in, the land.

Whatever god it was, who out of chaos
Brought order to the universe, and gave it
Division, subdivision, he molded earth,
In the beginning, into a great globe,
Even on every side, and bade the waters
To spread and rise, under the rushing winds,
Surrounding earth; he added ponds and marshes,
He banked the river-channels, and the waters
Feed earth or run to sea, and that great flood
Washes on shores, not banks. He made the plains
Spread wide, the valleys settle, and the forest
Be dressed in leaves; he made the rocky mountains
Rise to full height, and as the vault of Heaven
Has two zones, left and right, and one between them
Hotter than these, the Lord of all Creation
Marked on the earth the same design and pattern.
The torrid zone too hot for men to live in,
The north and south too cold, but in the middle
Varying climate, temperature and season.
Above all things the air, lighter than earth,
Lighter than water, heavier than fire,
Towers and spreads; there mist and cloud assemble,
And fearful thunder and lightning and cold winds,

But these, by the Creator's order, held
No general dominion; even as it is,
These brothers brawl and quarrel; though each one
Has his own quarter, still, they come near tearing
The universe apart. Eurys is monarch
Of the lands of dawn, the realms of Arahya,
The Persian ridges under the rays of morning.
Zephyrus holds the west that glows at sunset,
Boreas, who makes men shiver, holds the north,
Warm Auster governs in the misty southland,
And over them all presides the weightless ether,
Pure without taint of earth.

These boundaries given,
Behold, the stars, long hidden under darkness,
Broke through and shone, all over the spangled heaven,
Their home forever, and the gods lived there,
And shining fish were given the waves for dwelling
And beasts the earth, and birds the moving air.

But something else was needed, a finer being,
More capable of mind, a sage, a ruler,
So Man was born, it may be, in God's image,
Or Earth, perhaps, so newly separated
From the old fire of Heaven, still retained
Some seed of the celestial force which fashioned
Gods out of living clay and running water.
All other animals look downward; Man,
Alone, erect, can raise his face toward Heaven.

The Four Ages

The Golden Age was first, a time that cherished
Of its own will, justice and right; no law.
No punishment, was called for; fearfulness
Was quite unknown, and the bronze tablets held
No legal threatening; no suppliant throng

Studied a judge's face; there were no judges,
 There did not need to be. Trees had not yet
 Been cut and hollowed, to visit other shores.
 Men were content at home, and had no towns
 With moats and walls around them; and no trumpets
 Blared out alarms; things like swords and helmets
 Had not been heard of. No one needed soldiers.
 People were unaggressive, and unanxious;
 The years went by in peace. And Earth, untroubled,
 Unharried by hoe or plowshare, brought forth all
 That men had need for, and those men were happy,
 Gathering berries from the mountain sides,
 Cherries, or blackcaps, and the edible acorns.
 Spring was forever, with a west wind blowing
 Softly across the flowers no man had planted,
 And Earth, unplowed, brought forth rich grain; the field,
 Unfallowed, whitened with wheat, and there were rivers
 Of milk, and rivers of honey, and golden nectar
 Dripped from the dark-green oak-trees.

After Saturn

Was driven to the shadowy land of death,
 And the world was under Jove, the Age of Silver
 Came in, lower than gold, better than bronze.
 Jove made the springtime shorter, added winter,
 Summer, and autumn, the seasons as we know them.
 That was the first time when the burnt air glowed
 White-hot, or icicles hung down in winter.
 And men built houses for themselves; the caverns,
 The woodland thickets, and the bark-bound shelters
 No longer served; and the seeds of grain were planted
 In the long furrows, and the oxen struggled
 Groaning and laboring under the heavy yoke.

Then came the Age of Bronze, and dispositions
 Took on aggressive instincts, quick to arm,
 Yet not entirely evil. And last of all

The Iron Age succeeded, whose base vein
 Let loose all evil: modesty and truth
 And righteousness fled earth, and in their place
 Came trickery and slyness, plotting, swindling,
 Violence and the damned desire of having.
 Men spread their sails to winds unknown to sailors,
 The pines came down their mountain-sides, to revel
 And leap in the deep waters, and the ground,
 Free, once, to everyone, like air and sunshine,
 Was stepped off by surveyors. The rich earth,
 Good giver of all the bounty of the harvest,
 Was asked for more; they dug into her vitals,
 Pried out the wealth a kinder lord had hidden
 In Stygian shadow, all that precious metal,
 The root of evil. They found the guilt of iron,
 And gold, more guilty still. And War came forth
 That uses both to fight with; bloody hands
 Brandished the clashing weapons. Men lived on plunder.
 Guest was not safe from host, nor brother from brother,
 A man would kill his wife, a wife her husband,
 Stepmothers, dire and dreadful, stirred their brews
 With poisonous aconite, and sons would hustle
 Fathers to death, and Piety lay vanquished,
 And the maiden Justice, last of all immortals,
 Fled from the bloody earth.

Heaven was no safer.

Giants attacked the very throne of Heaven,
 Piled Pelion on Ossa, mountain on mountain
 Up to the very stars. Jove struck them down
 With thunderbolts, and the bulk of those huge bodies
 Lay on the earth, and bled, and Mother Earth,
 Made pregnant by that blood, brought forth new bodies,
 And gave them, to recall her older offspring,
 The forms of men. And this new stock was also
 Contemptuous of gods, and murder-hungry
 And violent. You would know they were sons of blood.

Jove's Intervention

And Jove was witness from his lofty throne
 Of all this evil, and groaned as he remembered
 The wicked revels of Lycaon's table,
 The latest guilt, a story still unknown
 To the high gods. In awful indignation
 He summoned them to council. No one dawdled.
 Easily seen when the night skies are clear,
 The Milky Way shines white. Along this road
 The gods move toward the palace of the Thunderer,
 His royal halls, and, right and left, the dwellings
 Of other gods are open, and guests come thronging.
 The lesser gods live in a meaner section,
 An area not reserved, as this one is,
 For the illustrious Great Wheels of Heaven.
 (Their Palatine Hill, if I might call it so.)

They took their places in the marble chamber
 Where high above them all their king was seated,
 Holding his ivory sceptre, shaking out
 Thrice, and again, his awful locks, the sign
 That made the earth and stars and ocean tremble,
 And then he spoke, in outrage: "I was troubled
 Less for the sovereignty of all the world
 In that old time when the snake-footed giants
 Laid each his hundred hands on captive Heaven.
 Monstrous they were, and hostile, but their warfare
 Sprung from one source, one body. Now, wherever
 The sea-gods roar around the earth, a race
 Must be destroyed, the race of men. I swear it!
 I swear by all the Stygian rivers gliding
 Under the world, I have tried all other measures.
 The knife must cut the cancer out, infection
 Averted while it can be, from our numbers.
 Those demigods, those rustic presences,

Nymphs, fauns, and satyrs, wood and mountain dwellers,
 We have not yet honored with a place in Heaven,
 But they should have some decent place to dwell in,
 In peace and safety. Safety? Do you reckon
 They will be safe, when I, who wield the thunder,
 Who rule you all as subjects, am subjected
 To the plottings of the barbarous Lycaon?"

They burned, they trembled. Who was this Lycaon,
 Guilty of such rank infamy? They shuddered
 In horror, with a fear of sudden ruin,
 As the whole world did later, when assassins
 Struck Julius Caesar down, and Prince Augustus
 Found satisfaction in the great devotion
 That cried for vengeance, even as Jove took pleasure,
 Then, in the gods' response. By word and gesture
 He calmed them down, awed them again to silence,
 And spoke once more:

The Story of Lycaon

"He has indeed been punished.
 On that score have no worry. But what he did,
 And how he paid, are things that I must tell you.
 I had heard the age was desperately wicked,
 I had heard, or so I hoped, a lie, a falsehood,
 So I came down, as man, from high Olympus,
 Wandered about the world. It would take too long
 To tell you how widespread was all that evil.
 All I had heard was grievous understatement!
 I had crossed Maenala, a country bristling
 With dens of animals, and crossed Cyllene,
 And cold Lycaeus' pine woods. Then I came
 At evening, with the shadows growing longer,
 To an Arcadian palace, where the tyrant
 Was anything but royal in his welcome.
 I gave a sign that a god had come, and people

Began to worship, and Lycaon mocked them,
 Laughed at their prayers, and said: 'Watch me find out
 Whether this fellow is a god or mortal,
 I can tell quickly, and no doubt about it.'
 He planned, that night, to kill me while I slumbered;
 That was his way to test the truth. Moreover,
 And not content with that, he took a hostage,
 One sent by the Molossians, cut his throat,
 Boiled pieces of his flesh, still warm with life,
 Broiled others, and set them before me on the table.
 That was enough. I struck, and the bolt of lightning
 Blasted the household of that guilty monarch.
 He fled in terror, reached the silent fields,
 And howled, and tried to speak. No use at all!
 Foam dripped from his mouth; bloodthirsty still, he turned
 Against the sheep, delighting still in slaughter,
 And his arms were legs, and his robes were shaggy hair,
 Yet he is still Lycaon, the same grayness,
 The same fierce face, the same red eyes, a picture
 Of bestial savagery. One house has fallen,
 But more than one deserves to. Fury reigns
 Over all the fields of Earth. They are sworn to evil,
 Believe it. Let them pay for it, and quickly!
 So stands my purpose."

Part of them approved
 With words and added fuel to his anger,
 And part approved with silence, and yet all
 Were grieving at the loss of humankind,
 Were asking what the world would be, bereft
 Of mortals: who would bring their altars incense?
 Would earth be given the beasts, to spoil and ravage?
 Jove told them not to worry; he would give them
 Another race, unlike the first, created
 Out of a miracle; he would see to it.

He was about to hurl his thunderbolts

At the whole world, but halted, fearing Heaven
 Would burn from fire so vast, and pole to pole
 Break out in flame and smoke, and he remembered
 The fates had said that some day land and ocean,
 The vault of Heaven, the whole world's mighty fortress,
 Besieged by fire, would perish. He put aside
 The bolts made in Cyclopean workshops; better,
 He thought, to drown the world by flooding water.

The Flood

So, in the cave of Aeolus, he prisoned
 The North-wind, and the West-wind, and such others
 As ever banish cloud, and he turned loose
 The South-wind, and the South-wind came out streaming
 With dripping wings, and pitch-black darkness veiling
 His terrible countenance. His beard is heavy
 With rain-cloud, and his hoary locks a torrent,
 Mists are his chaplet, and his wings and garments
 Run with the rain. His broad hands squeeze together
 Low-hanging clouds, and crash and rumble follow
 Before the cloudburst, and the rainbow, Iris,
 Draws water from the teeming earth, and feeds it
 Into the clouds again. The crops are ruined,
 The farmers' prayers all wasted, all the labor
 Of a long year, comes to nothing.

And Jove's anger,

Unbounded by his own domain, was given
 Help by his dark-blue brother. Neptune called
 His rivers all, and told them, very briefly,
 To loose their violence, open their houses,
 Pour over embankments, let the river horses
 Run wild as ever they would. And they obeyed him.
 His trident struck the shuddering earth; it opened
 Way for the rush of waters. The leaping rivers
 Flood over the great plains. Not only orchards
 Are swept away, not only grain and cattle,

Not only men and houses, but altars, temples,
 And shrines with holy fires. If any building
 Stands firm, the waves keep rising over its roof-top,
 Its towers are under water, and land and ocean
 Are all alike, and everything is ocean,
 An ocean with no shore-line.

Some poor fellow
 Seizes a hill-top; another, in a dinghy,
 Rows where he used to plough, and one goes sailing
 Over his fields of grain or over the chimney
 Of what was once his cottage. Someone catches
 Fish in the top of an elm-tree, or an anchor
 Drags in green meadow-land, or the curved keel brushes
 Grape-arbors under water. Ugly sea-cows
 Float where the slender she-goats used to nibble
 The tender grass, and the Nereids come swimming
 With curious wonder, looking, under water,
 At houses, cities, parks, and groves. The dolphins
 Invade the woods and brush against the oak-trees;
 The wolf swims with the lamb; lion and tiger
 Are borne along together; the wild boar
 Finds all his strength is useless, and the deer
 Cannot outspeed that torrent; wandering birds
 Look long, in vain, for landing-place, and tumble,
 Exhausted, into the sea. The deep's great license
 Has buried all the hills, and new waves thunder
 Against the mountain-tops. The flood has taken
 All things, or nearly all, and those whom water,
 By chance, has spared, starvation slowly conquers.

Deucalion and Pyrrha

Phocis, a fertile land, while there was land,
 Marked off Oetean from Boeotian fields.
 It was ocean now, a plain of sudden waters.
 There Mount Parnassus lifts its twin peaks skyward,
 High, steep, cloud-piercing. And Deucalion came there

Rowing his wife. There was no other land,
 The sea had drowned it all. And here they worshipped
 First the Corycian nymphs and native powers,
 Then Themis, oracle and fate-revealer.
 There was no better man than this Deucalion,
 No one more fond of right; there was no woman
 More scrupulously reverent than Pyrrha.
 So, when Jove saw the world was one great ocean,
 Only one woman left of all those thousands,
 And only one man left of all those thousands,
 Both innocent and worshipful, he parted
 The clouds, turned loose the North-wind, swept them off,
 Showed earth to heaven again, and sky to land,
 And the sea's anger dwindled, and King Neptune
 Put down his trident, calmed the waves, and Triton,
 Summoned from far down under, with his shoulders
 Barnacle-strewn, loomed up above the waters,
 The blue-green sea-god, whose resounding horn
 Is heard from shore to shore. Wet-bearded, Triton
 Set lip to that great shell, as Neptune ordered,
 Sounding retreat, and all the lands and waters
 Heard and obeyed. The sea has shores; the rivers,
 Still running high, have channels; the floods dwindle,
 Hill-tops are seen again; the trees, long buried,
 Rise with their leaves still muddy. The world returns.

Deucalion saw that world, all desolation,
 All emptiness, all silence, and his tears
 Rose as he spoke to Pyrrha: "O my wife,
 The only woman, now, on all this earth,
 My consort and my cousin and my partner
 In these immediate dangers, look! Of all the lands
 To East or West, we two, we two alone,
 Are all the population. Ocean holds
 Everything else; our foothold, our assurance,
 Are small as they can be, the clouds still frightful.

Poor woman—well, we are not all alone—
 Suppose you had been, how would you bear your fear?
 Who would console your grief? My wife, believe me,
 Had the sea taken you, I would have followed.
 If only I had the power, I would restore
 The nations as my father did, bring clay
 To life with breathing. As it is, we two
 Are all the human race, so Heaven has willed it,
 Samples of men, mere specimens.”

They wept,
 And prayed together, and having wept and prayed,
 Resolved to make petition to the goddess
 To seek her aid through oracles. Together
 They went to the river-water, the stream Cephissus,
 Still far from clear, but flowing down its channel,
 And they took river-water, sprinkled foreheads,
 Sprinkled their garments, and they turned their steps
 To the temple of the goddess, where the altars
 Stood with the fires gone dead, and ugly moss
 Stained pediment and column. At the stairs
 They both fell prone, kissed the chill stone in prayer:
 “If the gods’ anger ever listens
 To righteous prayers, O Themis, we implore you,
 Tell us by what device our wreck and ruin
 May be repaired. Bring aid, most gentle goddess,
 To sunken circumstance.”

And Themis heard them,
 And gave this oracle: “Go from the temple,
 Cover your heads, loosen your robes, and throw
 Your mother’s bones behind you!” Dumb, they stood
 In blank amazement, a long silence, broken
 By Pyrrha, finally: she would not do it!
 With trembling lips she prays whatever pardon
 Her disobedience might merit, but this outrage
 She dare not risk, insult her mother’s spirit
 By throwing her bones around. In utter darkness

They voice the cryptic saying over and over,
 What can it mean? They wonder. At last Deucalion
 Finds the way out: “I might be wrong, but surely
 The holy oracles would never counsel
 A guilty act. The earth is our great mother,
 And I suppose those bones the goddess mentions
 Are the stones of earth; the order means to throw them,
 The stones, behind us.”

She was still uncertain,
 And he by no means sure, and both distrustful
 Of that command from Heaven; but what damage,
 What harm, would there be in trying? They descended,
 Covered their heads, loosened their garments, threw
 The stones behind them as the goddess ordered.
 The stones—who would believe it, had we not
 The unimpeachable witness of Tradition?—
 Began to lose their hardness, to soften, slowly,
 To take on form, to grow in size, a little,
 Become less rough, to look like human beings,
 Or anyway as much like human beings
 As statues do, when the sculptor is only starting,
 Images half blocked out. The earthy portion,
 Damp with some moisture, turned to flesh, the solid
 Was bone, the veins were as they always had been.
 The stones the man had thrown turned into men,
 The stones the woman threw turned into women,
 Such being the will of God. Hence we derive
 The hardness that we have, and our endurance
 Gives proof of what we have come from.

Other forms

Of life came into being, generated
 Out of the earth: the sun burnt off the dampness,
 Heat made the slimy marshes swell; as seed
 Swells in a mother’s womb to shape and substance,
 So new forms came to life. When the Nile river
 Floods and recedes and the mud is warmed by sunshine,

Men, turning over the earth, find living things,
 And some not living, but nearly so, imperfect,
 On the verge of life, and often the same substance
 Is part alive, part only clay. When moisture
 Unites with heat, life is conceived; all things
 Come from this union. Fire may fight with water,
 But heat and moisture generate all things,
 Their discord being productive. So when earth,
 After that flood, still muddy, took the heat,
 Felt the warm fire of sunlight, she conceived,
 Brought forth, after their fashion, all the creatures,
 Some old, some strange and monstrous.

One, for instance,

She bore unwanted, a gigantic serpent,
 Python by name, whom the new people dreaded,
 A huge bulk on the mountain-side. Apollo,
 God of the glittering bow, took a long time
 To bring him down, with arrow after arrow
 He had never used before except in hunting
 Deer and the skipping goats. Out of the quiver
 Sped arrows by the thousand, till the monster,
 Dying, poured poisonous blood on those black wounds.
 In memory of this, the sacred games,
 Called Pythian, were established, and Apollo
 Ordained for all young winners in the races,
 On foot or chariot, for victorious fighters,
 The crown of oak. That was before the laurel,
 That was before Apollo wreathed his forehead
 With garlands from that tree, or any other.

Apollo and Daphne

Now the first girl Apollo loved was Daphne,
 Whose father was the river-god Peneus,
 And this was no blind chance, but Cupid's malice.
 Apollo, with pride and glory still upon him
 Over the Python slain, saw Cupid bending

His tight-strung little bow. "O silly youngster,"
 He said, "What are you doing with such weapons?
 Those are for grown-ups! The bow is for my shoulders;
 I never fail in wounding beast or mortal,
 And not so long ago I slew the Python
 With countless darts; his bloated body covered
 Acre on endless acre, and I slew him!
 The torch, my boy, is enough for you to play with,
 To get the love-fires burning. Do not meddle
 With honors that are mine!" And Cupid answered:
 "Your bow shoots everything, Apollo—maybe—
 But mine will fix you! You are far above
 All creatures living, and by just that distance
 Your glory less than mine." He shook his wings,
 Soared high, came down to the shadows of Parnassus,
 Drew from his quiver different kinds of arrows,
 One causing love, golden and sharp and gleaming,
 The other blunt, and tipped with lead, and serving
 To drive all love away, and this blunt arrow
 He used on Daphne, but he fired the other,
 The sharp and golden shaft, piercing Apollo
 Through bones, through marrow, and at once he loved
 And she at once fled from the name of lover,
 Rejoicing in the woodland hiding places
 And spoils of beasts which she had taken captive,
 A rival of Diana, virgin goddess.
 She had many suitors, but she scorned them all;
 Wanting no part of any man, she travelled
 The pathless groves, and had no care whatever
 For husband, love, or marriage. Her father often
 Said, "Daughter, give me a son-in-law!" and "Daughter,
 Give me some grandsons!" But the marriage torches
 Were something hateful, criminal, to Daphne,
 So she would blush, and put her arms around him,
 And coax him: "Let me be a virgin always;
 Diana's father said she might. Dear father!

Many have gotten into decent bedrooms
 Pretending to be gods. It is not enough
 Even if he is Jove; you should make him prove it
 If he really is. Let him be the kind of fellow,
 Big as he is, when he takes Juno to him.
 Let him have you, but first let him come in all his glory!"
 So Juno molded Cadmus' innocent daughter,
 And she asked Jove for a favor, and did not name it.
 And he replied: "Ask and it shall be granted,
 I swear by Styx, the god-compelling river."
 And Semele, happy in her own ill-fortune,
 Too powerful in winning a lover over
 And doomed to die on that account, responded:
 "Come to me as you come in love to Juno!"
 Jove would have made her stop, but she had finished.
 He groans in pity: she cannot take back
 What she had wished, nor he what he had sworn.
 So, very sorrowful, he climbs the Heaven,
 Beckons the following mist and clouds and lightning
 And winds and thunder and last of all the fire
 No man escapes from. Still, he tries to temper
 His armament, and leaves the bolts behind him
 With which he hurled Typhoeus down from Heaven.
 Those weapons are too savage. He has others
 Made in the Cyclops' workshop, somewhat lighter,
 Less full of rage and fire, second-string weapons
 In the slang of the gods. And these he takes and enters
 The house of Semele. Her mortal body
 Could not endure that rush, and in that mating,
 That gift, burned utterly. The child in the womb,
 Only half-formed, was taken from her body,
 Sewed up (if anybody can believe it)
 In the thigh of Jove, to wait for birth, and Ino,
 Semele's sister, watched him in his cradle,
 And after that the nymphs of Nysa hid him
 And brought his milk home to their caverns for him.

The Story of Tiresias

So, while these things were happening on earth,
 And Bacchus, Semele's son, was twice delivered,
 Safe in his cradle, Jove, they say, was happy
 And feeling pretty good (with wine) forgetting
 Anxiety and care, and killing time
 Joking with Juno. "I maintain," he told her,
 "You females get more pleasure out of loving
 Than we poor males do, ever." She denied it,
 So they decided to refer the question
 To wise Tiresias' judgment: he should know
 What love was like, from either point of view.
 Once he had come upon two serpents mating
 In the green woods, and struck them from each other,
 And thereupon, from man was turned to woman,
 And was a woman seven years, and saw
 The serpents once again, and once more struck them
 Apart, remarking: "If there is such magic
 In giving you blows, that man is turned to woman,
 It may be woman is turned to man. Worth trying."
 And so he was a man again; as umpire,
 He took the side of Jove. And Juno
 Was a bad loser, and she said that umpires
 Were always blind, and made him so forever.
 No god can over-rule another's action,
 But the Almighty Father, out of pity,
 In compensation, gave Tiresias power
 To know the future, so there was some honor
 Along with punishment.

The Story of Echo and Narcissus

And so Tiresias,
 Famous through all Aonian towns and cities,
 Gave irreproachable answers to all comers
 Who sought his guidance. One of the first who tested

The truths he told was a naiad of the river,
 Liriope, whom the river-god, Cephisus
 Embraced and ravished in his watery dwelling.
 In time she bore a child, most beautiful
 Even as child, gave him the name Narcissus,
 And asked Tiresias if the boy would ever
 Live to a ripe old age. Tiresias answered:
 "Yes, if he never knows himself." How silly
 Those words seemed, for how long! But as it happened,
 Time proved them true—the way he died, the strangeness
 Of his infatuation.

Now Narcissus

Was sixteen years of age, and could be taken
 Either for boy or man; and boys and girls
 Both sought his love, but in that slender stripling
 Was pride so fierce no boy, no girl, could touch him.
 He was out hunting one day, driving deer
 Into the nets, when a nymph named Echo saw him,
 A nymph whose way of talking was peculiar
 In that she could not start a conversation
 Nor fail to answer other people talking.
 Up to this time Echo still had a body,
 She was not merely voice. She liked to chatter,
 But had no power of speech except the power
 To answer in the words she last had heard.
 Juno had done this: when she went out looking
 For Jove on top of some nymph among the mountains,
 Echo would stall the goddess off by talking
 Until the nymphs had fled. Sooner or later
 Juno discovered this and said to Echo:
 "The tongue that made a fool of me will shortly
 Have shorter use, the voice be brief hereafter."
 Those were not idle words; now Echo always
 Says the last thing she hears, and nothing further.
 She saw Narcissus roaming through the country,
 Saw him, and burned, and followed him in secret,

Burning the more she followed, as when sulphur
 Smears on the rim of torches, catches fire
 When other fire comes near it. Oh, how often
 She wanted to come near with coaxing speeches,
 Make soft entreaties to him! But her nature
 Sternly forbids; the one thing not forbidden
 Is to make answers. She is more than ready
 For words she can give back. By chance Narcissus
 Lost track of his companions, started calling
 "Is anybody here?" and "Here!" said Echo.
 He looked around in wonderment, called louder
 "Come to me!" "Come to me!" came back the answer.
 He looked behind him, and saw no one coming;
 "Why do you run from me?" and heard his question
 Repeated in the woods. "Let us get together!"
 There was nothing Echo would ever say more gladly,
 "Let us get together!" And, to help her words,
 Out of the woods she came, with arms all ready
 To fling around his neck. But he retreated:
 "Keep your hands off," he cried, "and do not touch me!
 I would die before I give you a chance at me."
 "I give you a chance at me," and that was all
 She ever said thereafter, spurned and hiding,
 Ashamed, in the leafy forests, in lonely caverns.
 But still her love clings to her and increases
 And grows on suffering; she cannot sleep,
 She frets and pines, becomes all gaunt and haggard,
 Her body dries and shrivels till voice only
 And bones remain, and then she is voice only
 For the bones are turned to stone. She hides in woods
 And no one sees her now along the mountains,
 But all may hear her, for her voice is living.

She was not the only one on whom Narcissus
 Had visited frustration; there were others,
 Naiads or Oreads, and young men also

Till finally one rejected youth, in prayer,
 Raised up his hands to Heaven: "May Narcissus
 Love one day, so, himself, and not win over
 The creature whom he loves!" Nemesis heard him,
 Goddess of Vengeance, and judged the plea was righteous.
 There was a pool, silver with shining water,
 To which no shepherds came, no goats, no cattle,
 Whose glass no bird, no beast, no falling leaf
 Had ever troubled. Grass grew all around it,
 Green from the nearby water, and with shadow
 No sun burned hotly down on. Here Narcissus,
 Worn from the heat of hunting, came to rest
 Finding the place delightful, and the spring
 Refreshing for the thirsty. As he tried
 To quench his thirst, inside him, deep within him,
 Another thirst was growing, for he saw
 An image in the pool, and fell in love
 With that unbodied hope, and found a substance
 In what was only shadow. He looks in wonder,
 Charmed by himself, spell-bound, and no more moving
 Than any marble statue. Lying prone
 He sees his eyes, twin stars, and locks as comely
 As those of Bacchus or the god Apollo,
 Smooth cheeks, and ivory neck, and the bright beauty
 Of countenance, and a flush of color rising
 In the fair whiteness. Everything attracts him
 That makes him so attractive. Foolish boy,
 He wants himself; the loved becomes the lover,
 The seeker sought, the kindler burns. How often
 He tries to kiss the image in the water,
 Dips in his arms to embrace the boy he sees there,
 And finds the boy, himself, elusive always,
 Not knowing what he sees, but burning for it,
 The same delusion mocking his eyes and teasing.
 Why try to catch an always fleeing image,
 Poor credulous youngster? What you seek is nowhere,

And if you turn away, you will take with you
 The boy you love. The vision is only shadow,
 Only reflection, lacking any substance.
 It comes with you, it stays with you, it goes
 Away with you, if you can go away.
 No thought of food, no thought of rest, can make him
 Forsake the place. Stretched on the grass, in shadow,
 He watches, all unsatisfied, that image
 Vain and illusive, and he almost drowns
 In his own watching eyes. He rises, just a little,
 Enough to lift his arms in supplication
 To the trees around him, crying to the forest:
 "What love, whose love, has ever been more cruel?
 You woods should know: you have given many lovers
 Places to meet and hide in; has there ever,
 Through the long centuries, been anyone
 Who has pined away as I do? He is charming,
 I see him, but the charm and sight escape me.
 I love him and I cannot seem to find him!
 To make it worse, no sea, no road, no mountain,
 No city-wall, no gate, no barrier, parts us
 But a thin film of water. He is eager
 For me to hold him. When my lips go down
 To kiss the pool, his rise, he reaches toward me.
 You would think that I could touch him—almost nothing
 Keeps us apart. Come out, whoever you are!
 Why do you tease me so? Where do you go
 When I am reaching for you? I am surely
 Neither so old or ugly as to scare you,
 And nymphs have been in love with me. You promise,
 I think, some hope with a look of more than friendship.
 You reach out arms when I do, and your smile
 Follows my smiling; I have seen your tears
 When I was tearful; you nod and beckon when I do;
 Your lips, it seems, answer when I am talking
 Though what you say I cannot hear. I know

The truth at last. He is myself! I feel it,
 I know my image now. I burn with love
 Of my own self; I start the fire I suffer.
 What shall I do? Shall I give or take the asking?
 What shall I ask for? What I want is with me,
 My riches make me poor. If I could only
 Escape from my own body! if I could only—
 How curious a prayer from any lover—
 Be parted from my love! And now my sorrow
 Is taking all my strength away; I know
 I have not long to live, I shall die early,
 And death is not so terrible, since it takes
 My trouble from me; I am sorry only
 The boy I love must die: we die together.”
 He turned again to the image in the water,
 Seeing it blur through tears, and the vision fading,
 And as he saw it vanish, he called after:
 “Where are you going? Stay: do not desert me,
 I love you so. I cannot touch you; let me
 Keep looking at you always, and in looking
 Nourish my wretched passion!” In his grief
 He tore his garment from the upper margin,
 Beat his bare breast with hands as pale as marble,
 And the breast took on a glow, a rosy color,
 As apples are white and red, sometimes, or grapes
 Can be both green and purple. The water clears,
 He sees it all once more, and cannot bear it.
 As yellow wax dissolves with warmth around it,
 As the white frost is gone in morning sunshine,
 Narcissus, in the hidden fire of passion,
 Wanes slowly, with the ruddy color going,
 The strength and hardihood and comeliness,
 Fading away, and even the very body
 Echo had loved. She was sorry for him now,
 Though angry still, remembering; you could hear her
 Answer “Alas!” in pity, when Narcissus

Cried out “Alas!” You could hear her own hands beating
 Her breast when he beat his. “Farewell, dear boy,
 Beloved in vain!” were his last words, and Echo
 Called the same words to him. His weary head
 Sank to the greensward, and death closed the eyes
 That once had marveled at their owner’s beauty.
 And even in Hell, he found a pool to gaze in,
 Watching his image in the Stygian water.
 While in the world above, his naiad sisters
 Mourned him, and dryads wept for him, and Echo
 Mourned as they did, and wept with them, preparing
 The funeral pile, the bier, the brandished torches,
 But when they sought his body, they found nothing,
 Only a flower with a yellow center
 Surrounded with white petals.

The Story of Pentheus and Bacchus

As the story
 Spread round the world, Tiresias was honored
 For his prophetic wisdom. Only Pentheus,
 Echion’s son, who laughed at gods, was scornful,
 Made fun of the old man’s prophecies, and mocked him
 About his inner darkness. But Tiresias
 Shook his gray head in warning: “Blindness, Pentheus,
 Might be a blessing in your case, to keep you
 From ever looking on the rites of Bacchus.
 The day is near, I know, when the new god
 Shall come, the son of Semele, whose due
 Is worship from you; if you scorn his temple,
 You will be torn into a thousand pieces,
 Your blood pollute the woods, and its defilement
 Spatter your mother and your mother’s sisters.
 And this will happen: you will never honor
 That god, and you will say that even in blindness
 I have seen all too well.”

Pentheus flung him

It is no wonder to me now, no wonder
 Pasiphae preferred the bull to you—
 The bull was gentler! Woe to me! He orders
 His men to hurry, and the waves resound
 To the beat of the oars, and the land and I are fading
 Out of his sight. In vain! In vain, forgetter
 Of all my service! I shall follow you
 Against your will, cling to the curve of the stern,
 Be towed through the long waters." And she leapt
 Into the sea, swam after the ship, her passion
 Giving her strength, clung to the Cretan vessel,
 Unwanted, hateful. And her father saw her
 From high in the air—he had become an osprey
 With tawny wings—came swooping down upon her
 To tear her with his crooked beak in vengeance,
 And she, in terror, loosed her hold, and, falling,
 Was buoyed by the light air; she seemed a feather,
 She was all feathers! And now her name is Ciris,
 The bird whose name comes from the Greek for shearer.

And Minos duly paid his vows to Jove,
 A hundred bulls, on landing, and in the palace
 Hung up the spoils of war, but in his household
 Shame had grown big, and the hybrid monster-offspring
 Revealed his queen's adultery, and Minos
 Contrived to hide this specimen in a maze,
 A labyrinth built by Daedalus, an artist
 Famous in building, who could set in stone
 Confusion and conflict, and deceive the eye
 With devious aisles and passages. As Maeander
 Plays in the Phrygian fields, a doubtful river,
 Flowing and looping back and sends its waters
 Either to source or sea, so Daedalus
 Made those innumerable windings wander,
 And hardly found his own way out again,
 Through the deceptive twistings of that prison.

Here Minos shut the Minotaur, and fed him
 Twice, each nine years, on tribute claimed from Athens,
 Blood of that city's youth. But the third tribute
 Ended the rite forever. Ariadne,
 For Theseus' sake, supplied the clue, the thread
 Of gold, to unwind the maze which no one ever
 Had entered and left, and Theseus took her with him,
 Spreading his sails for Dia, and there he left her,
 Fine thanks for her devotion, but Bacchus brought her
 His loving aid, and that she might be shining
 In the immortal stars, he took the chaplet
 She wore, and sent it spinning high, its jewels
 Changing to gleaming fire, a coronal
 Still visible, a heavenly constellation
 Between the Kneeler and the Serpent-Holder.

The Story of Daedalus and Icarus

Homesick for homeland, Daedalus hated Crete
 And his long exile there, but the sea held him.
 "Though Minos blocks escape by land or water,"
 Daedalus said, "surely the sky is open,
 And that's the way we'll go. Minos' dominion
 Does not include the air." He turned his thinking
 Toward unknown arts, changing the laws of nature.
 He laid out feathers in order, first the smallest,
 A little larger next it, and so continued,
 The way that pan-pipes rise in gradual sequence.
 He fastened them with twine and wax, at middle,
 At bottom, so, and bent them, gently curving,
 So that they looked like wings of birds, most surely.
 And Icarus, his son, stood by and watched him,
 Not knowing he was dealing with his downfall,
 Stood by and watched, and raised his shiny face
 To let a feather, light as down, fall on it,
 Or stuck his thumb into the yellow wax,
 Fooling around, the way a boy will, always,

Whenever a father tries to get some work done.
 Still, it was done at last, and the father hovered,
 Poised, in the moving air, and taught his son:
 "I warn you, Icarus, fly a middle course:
 Don't go too low, or water will weigh the wings down;
 Don't go too high, or the sun's fire will burn them.
 Keep to the middle way. And one more thing,
 No fancy steering by star or constellation,
 Follow my lead!" That was the flying lesson,
 And now to fit the wings to the boy's shoulders.
 Between the work and warning the father found
 His cheeks were wet with tears, and his hands trembled.
 He kissed his son (*Good-bye*, if he had known it),
 Rose on his wings, flew on ahead, as fearful
 As any bird launching the little nestlings
 Out of high nest into thin air. *Keep on*,
Keep on, he signals, *follow me!* He guides him
 In flight—O fatal art!—and the wings move
 And the father looks back to see the son's wings moving.
 Far off, far down, some fisherman is watching
 As the rod dips and trembles over the water,
 Some shepherd rests his weight upon his crook,
 Some ploughman on the handles of the ploughshare,
 And all look up, in absolute amazement,
 At those air-borne above. They must be gods!
 They were over Samos, Juno's sacred island,
 Delos and Paros toward the left, Lebinthus
 Visible to the right, and another island,
 Calymne, rich in honey. And the boy
 Thought *This is wonderful!* and left his father,
 Soared higher, higher, drawn to the vast heaven,
 Nearer the sun, and the wax that held the wings
 Melted in that fierce heat, and the bare arms
 Beat up and down in air, and lacking oarage
 Took hold of nothing. *Father!* he cried, and *Father!*
 Until the blue sea hushed him, the dark water

Men call the Icarian now. And Daedalus,
 Father no more, called "Icarus, where are you!
 Where are you, Icarus? Tell me where to find you!"
 And saw the wings on the waves, and cursed his talents,
 Buried the body in a tomb, and the land
 Was named for Icarus.

During the burial

A noisy partridge, from a muddy ditch,
 Looked out, drummed with her wings in loud approval.
 No other bird, those days, was like the partridge,
 Newcomer to the ranks of birds; the story
 Reflects no credit on Daedalus. His sister,
 Ignorant of the fates, had sent her son
 To Daedalus as apprentice, only a youngster,
 Hardly much more than twelve years old, but clever,
 With an inventive turn of mind. For instance,
 Studying a fish's backbone for a model,
 He had notched a row of teeth in a strip of iron,
 Thus making the first saw, and he had bound
 Two arms of iron together with a joint
 To keep them both together and apart,
 One standing still, the other traversing
 In a circle, so men came to have the compass.
 And Daedalus, in envy, hurled the boy
 Headlong from the high temple of Minerva,
 And lied about it, saying he had fallen
 Through accident, but Minerva, kind protectress
 Of all inventive wits, stayed him in air,
 Clothed him with plumage; he still retained his aptness
 In feet and wings, and kept his old name, Perdix,
 But in the new bird-form, Perdix, the partridge,
 Never flies high, nor nests in trees, but flutters
 Close to the ground, and the eggs are laid in hedgerows.
 The bird, it seems, remembers, and is fearful
 Of all high places.

Now the land of Etna