BOOK I

Prologue  The Creation  The Four Ages

The Giants  Lycaon  The Flood  Deucalion & Pyrrha  Python

Apollo & Daphne  Io & Jove  Syrinx

Io & Jove  Phaethon
PROLOGUE - THE CREATION

My soul would sing of metamorphoses. But since, 0 gods, you were the source of these bodies becoming other bodies, breathe your breath into my book of changes: may the song I sing be seamless as its way weaves from the world's beginning to our day.

Before the sea and lands began to be, before the sky had mantled every thing, then all of nature's face was featureless—what men call chaos: undigested mass of crude, confused, and scrambled elements, a heap of seeds that clashed, of things mismatched. There was no Titan Sun to light the world, no crescent Moon—no Phoebe—to renew her slender horns; in the surrounding air, earth's weight had yet to find its balanced state; and Amphitrite's arms had not yet stretched along the farthest margins of the land.

For though the sea and land and air were there, the land could not be walked upon, the sea could not be swum, the air was without splendor: no thing maintained its shape; all were at war; in one same body cold and hot would battle: the damp contended with the dry, things hard with soft, and weighty things with weightless parts.

A god—and nature, now become benign—ended this strife. He separated sky and earth, and earth and waves, and he defined pure air and thicker air. Unraveling these things from their blind heap, assigning each its place—distinct—he linked them all in peace. First, the weightless force of heaven's dome, shot up; it occupied the highest zone. Just under fire, the light air found its home.

Latuf [1–30]
The earth, more dense, attracted elements
more gross; its own mass made it sink below.
And flowing water filled the final space;
it held the solid world in its embrace.
When he—whichever god it was—arrayed
that swarm, aligned, designed, allotted, made
each part into a portion of a whole,
then he, that earth might be symmetrical,
first shaped its sides into a giant ball.
He then commanded seas to stretch beneath
high winds, to swell, to coil, to reach and ring
shorelines and inlet. And he added springs
and lakes and endless marshes and confined
descending streams in banks that slope and twine:
these rivers flow across their own terrains;
their waters sink into the ground or gain
the sea and are received by that wide plain
of freer waters—there, they beat no more
against their banks, but pound the shoals and shores.

At his command, the fields enlarged their reach,
the valleys sank, the woods were clothed with leaves,
and rocky mountains rose. And as the sky
divides into two zones on its right side,
with just as many to the left, to which
the hottest zone is added as a fifth,
the god provided regions that divide:
the mass the heavens wrap, and he impressed
as many zones upon the earth. Of these,
the middle zone, because of its fierce heat,
is uninhabitable; and thick snows
cover two outer zones; between them he
aligned two other regions, and to these
he gave a clement climate, mixing heat
and cold. Above, the air extends; and for
as much as earth is heavier than water,
so is the air more ponderous than fire.
He ordered fog and clouds to gather there—
in air—and thunder, which would terrify
the human mind; there, too, the god assigned
the winds that, from colliding clouds, breed lightning.

Yet he who was the world's artificer
did not allow the winds to rule the air
unchecked, set free to riot everywhere.
(But while each wind received a separate tract,
it still is difficult to curb their blasts,
to keep the world, which they would rend, intact:
though they are brothers, they forever clash.)
Eurus retreated toward Aurora's lands,
into the Nabataeans' kingdom and
to Persia, where the rays of morning meet
the mountain crests. And Zephyrus now went
to shorelines warm with sunset, in the west.
To Scythia, beneath the northern Wain,
swept horrid Boreas. Incessant rain
and mists that drench the southlands opposite—
this was the work of Auster. The god placed
above these winds the ether, without weight,
a fluid free of earth's impurity.

No sooner had he set all things within
defining limits than the stars, long hid
beneath the crushing darkness, could begin
to gleam throughout the heavens. That no region
be left without its share of living things,
stars and the forms of gods then occupied
the porch of heaven; and the waters shared
their dwelling with the gleaming fishes; earth
received the beasts, and restless air, the birds.

An animal with higher intellect,
more noble, able—one to rule the rest:
such was the living thing the earth still lacked.
Then man was born. Either the Architect
of All, the author of the universe.
in order to beget a better world,
created man from seed divine—or else
Prometheus, son of Iapetus, made man
by mixing new-made earth with fresh rainwater
(for earth had only recently been set
apart from heaven, and the earth still kept
seeds of the sky—remains of their shared birth);
and when he fashioned man, his mold recalled
the masters of all things, the gods. And while
all other animals are bent, head down,
and fix their gaze upon the ground, to man
he gave a face that is held high; he had
man stand erect, his eyes upon the stars.
So was the earth, which until then had been
so rough and indistinct, transformed: it wore
a thing unknown before—the human form.

That first age was an age of gold: no law
and no compulsion then were needed; all
kept faith; the righteous way was freely willed.
There were no penalties that might instill
dark fears, no menaces inscribed upon
bronze tablets; trembling crowds did not implore
the demency of judges; but, secure,
men lived without defenders. In those times,
upon its native mountain heights, the pine
still stood unfelled; no wood had yet been hauled
down to the limpid waves, that it might sail
to foreign countries; and the only coasts
that mortals knew in that age were their own.
The towns were not yet girded by steep moats;
there were no curving horns of brass, and no
brass trumpets—straight, unbent; there were no swords,
no helmets. No one needed warriors;
the nations lived at peace, in tranquil ease.
Earth of itself—and uncompelled—untouched

by hoes, not torn by ploughshares, offered all
that one might need: men did not have to seek:
they simply gathered mountain strawberries
and the arbutus’ fruit and cornel cherries;
and thick upon their prickly stems, blackberries;
and acorns fallen from Jove’s sacred tree.
There spring was never-ending. The soft breeze
of tender zephyrs wafted and caressed
the flowers that sprang unplanted, without seed.
The earth, untilli, brought forth abundant yields;
and though they never had lain fallow, fields
were yellow with the heavy stalks of wheat.
And streams of milk and streams of nectar flowed,
and golden honey dripped from the holm oak.

But after Saturn had been banished, sent
down to dark Tartarus, Jove’s rule began;
the silver age is what the world knew then—an
age inferior to golden times,
but if compared to tawny bronze, more prized.
Jove curbed the span that spring had had before;
he made the year run through four seasons’ course:
the winter, summer, varied fall, and short
springtime. The air was incandescent, parched
by blazing heat—or felt the freezing gusts,
congealing icicles: such heat and frost
as earth had never known before. Men sought—
for the first time—the shelter of a house;
until then, they had made their homes in caves,
dense thickets, and in branches they had heaped
and bound with bark. Now, too, they planted seeds
of wheat in lengthly furrows; and beneath
the heavy weight of yokes, the bullocks groaned.

The third age saw the race of bronze: more prone
to cruelty, more quick to use fierce arms,
but not yet sacrilegious.
What bestowed its name upon the last age was hard iron. And this, the worst of ages, suddenly gave way to every foul impiety; earth saw the flight of faith and modesty and truth—and in their place came snares and fraud, deceit and force and sacrilegious love of gain. Men spread their sails before the winds, whose ways the mariner had scarcely learned: the wooden keels, which once had stood as trunks upon the mountain slopes, now danced upon the unfamiliar waves. And now the ground, which once—just like the sunlight and the air—had been a common good, one all could share, was marked and measured by the keen surveyor—he drew the long confines, the boundaries. Not only did men ask of earth its wealth, its harvest crops and foods that nourish us, they also delved into the bowels of earth: there they began to dig for what was hid deep underground beside the shades of Syrinx: the treasures that spur men to sacrilege. And so foul iron and still fouler gold were brought to light—and war, which fights for both and, in its bloodstained hands, holds clanging arms. Men live on plunder; guests cannot trust hosts; the son-in-law can now betray his own father-in-law; and even brothers show scant love and faith. The husband plots the death of his own wife, and she plots his. And dread stepmothers ply their fatal poisons; sons now tally—early on—how many years their fathers still may live. Now piety lies vanquished; and the maid Astraea, last of the immortals, leaves the blood-soaked earth.

And in this age, not even heaven's heights are safer than the earth. They say the Giants, striving to gain the kingdom of the sky, heaped mountain peak on mountain mass, star-high. Then Jove, almighty Father, hurled his bolts of lightning, smashed Olympus, and dashed down Mount Pelion from Mount Ossa. Overwhelmed by their own bulk, these awesome bodies sprawled; and Earth soaked up the blood of her dread sons; and with their blood still warm, she gave their gore new life: so that the Giants' race might not be lost without a trace, she gave their shape to humans whom she fashioned from that blood. But even this new race despised the gods; and they were keen for slaughter, bent on force: it's clear to see that they were born of blood.

When Jove, the son of Saturn, saw this scene from his high citadel, he groaned; recalling Lycaon's recent monstrous meal (a feast the other gods had yet to hear about), his heart was filled with anger such as Jove can feel—a giant rage. And he convoked a council of the gods; they came at once.

On high there is a road that can be seen when heaven is serene: the Milky Way is named—and famed—for its bright white array; to reach the regal halls of mighty Jove, the Thunderer, the gods must take this road. On either side there range the homes of those who are the noblest of the gods, the most illustrious and powerful; their doors are open wide; their halls are always thronged.
LYCAON

(thel lesser gods have homes in other zones).
And if this not be too audacious, I
should call this site high heaven’s Palatine.

And now, within the marble council hall,
the gods were seated. Throned above them all,
and leaning on his ivory scepter, Jove—
three times and then a fourth—shook his dread locks
and so perturbed the earth and seas and stars.
Then, opening his angry lips, he said:

“Now, more than ever, I am plagued, beset
by cares in governing the world; I faced
those horrid Giants, with their snake-shaped feet;
each monster, with the hundred hands he had,
was ready to assail the sky, to seize
these heavens—but that challenge was much less
than what confronts us now. For, in the end,
however fierce they were, those Giants all—
when they attacked—formed part of one same pack.
But now I must contend with scattered men;
throughout the world, wherever Nereus’ waves
resound, I shall destroy the mortals’ race.
I swear on the infernal streams that glide
beneath the woods of Styx, that I have tried
all other means; and now I must excise
that malady which can’t be cured: mankind—
lest the untainted beings on the earth
become infected, too. I have half-gods
and rustic deities—Nymphs, Satyrs, Fauns,
and woodland gods who haunt the mountain slopes:
we’ve not yet found them fit for heaven’s honors,
but let’s ensure their safety on the lands
we have assigned to them. Can you, o gods,
believe they are secure when I myself,
who am the lord of lightning and your lord,
met with the trap Lycaon set for me—
Lycaon, famed for his ferocity?”

All shouted, keen to hear who had been guilty
of such a sacrilege: even as when
an impious band was fierce in its attempt
to blot the name of Rome and, to that end,
shed Caesar’s blood; and all of humankind,
faced with calamity, was horrified,
the whole world shuddering. And you, Augustus,
are no less pleased by all the firm devotion
your people show to you than Jove was then
to hear the gods outcry on his behalf.

But Jove, with word and gesture, curbed the uproar;
when they had quieted, his words once more
could break the silence in the hall: “Be sure—
he has already paid the penalty.
But I’ll tell you his crime and punishment.
I’d heard about this age of infancy;
and hoping to disprove such tidings, I
descended from Olympus’ heights; I went
from land to land, a god in human guise.
Just now, it would be useless to describe
each sacrilege I found—upon all sides:
the truth was far, far worse than what I’d heard.
And I had crossed Mount Maenal’s dread slopes,
home of wild beasts; I passed Cyllene’s peak
and chill Lycaean pine grove. So I reached
the region and the uninviting home
of the Arcadian tyrant. Dusk had fallen,
and night was soon to follow. I’d made known
I was a god, and an Arcadian crowd
began to worship me. At first Lycaon
just jeered at all their pious prayers, but then
he said: ‘I mean to test him; let us see
if he, beyond all doubt—infallibly—
is god or man.’ This was the test he’d planned:
by night—with me asleep—treacherously
to murder me. And not content with that,
he seized a hostage the Molossians
LYCAON

had sent to him; Lycaon cut his throat; some of the still warm limbs he boiled in water, and some he roasted on the fire. No sooner had he set these before me as my meal than I, with my avenging lightning bolt, struck down his home, which caved in on itself—walls worthy of their owner. He ran off in panic, and when he had reached the fields, within the stillness, he began to howl: he tried to utter words—to no avail. Wrath rises to his mouth; he foams; and just as he was always keen on slaughter, now he turns against the sheep; indeed he's pleased to shed more blood. His clothes are changed to fur, his arms to legs: he has become a wolf. But he keeps traces of his former shape. His hair is gray; he has the same fierce gaze; his eyes still glitter, and he still presents a savage image. Yes, one house collapsed; but it was more than one I should have smashed. Wherever earth extends, fierce Fury reigns! A vast cabal of crime—that's what I see. Let them all pay the proper penalties without delay. For such is my decree."

Some of the gods approve Jove's words with shouts, inciting him still more; some indicate assent with silent signs. In any case, complete destruction of the human race saddens them all. What aspect would earth take once it was stripped of men? Who'd offer incense upon the altar? Had Jove planned by chance on wild beasts as earth's sole inhabitants and overlords? Such were the things they asked. Their king was quick to set their fears at rest: he would take care of everything; he swore a new race, one far different from the first, emerging wondrously, would share the earth. □ □ □

THE FLOOD

And now, as Jove was just about to hurl his thunderbolts at the whole earth, he stayed his hand: he was afraid that all those flames might set the sacred sky ablaze, ignite the world from pole to pole. He brought to mind that, in the book of fates, this was inscribed: a time would come when sea and land would burn, a conflagration that would overturn the palace of the sky—in fact destroy the stunning fabric of the universe. And so Jove set aside his lightning bolts forged by the Cyclops; in their stead he chose another punishment: he planned to drown the race of men beneath the waves: he'd send a deluge down from every part of heaven. At once, within the caves of Aeolus, Jove shuts up Boreas and other gusts that might disperse the clouds. But he frees Notus, who flies out on drenched wings: his awesome face is veiled in pitch-black darkness, and his beard is heavy with rainclouds, and water flows down his white hairs; dark fog rests on his brow; his wings and robes are dripping. Suddenly his vast hands press against the hanging clouds; and from the sky, rain pours as thunder roars. Then Iris, Juno's messenger—her robes are many-colored—fetches water, fuels the clouds with still more rain. The crops are felled; the wretched farmer weeps as he sees all his hopes forlorn, in ruins on the ground—the labor of the long years—useless, gone.

But angry Jove is hardly satisfied with just the waters of his realm on high: he needs his azure brother's aid, his waves—and Neptune offers help without delay.

Latin [217–22]
That lord of waters summons all his rivers; they hurry to his halls. This is his speech: "The time is late. No long harangues. In brief: set all your forces free—that's what we need! Open your gates and let your currents speed: loosen the reins; don't slow or stay your streams!" So he commands. His river-gods disband; returning to their homes, they all unleash their founts and springs; and these rush toward the sea. Neptune himself lifts high his trident, strikes the earth: it shakes and, as it shudders, frees a pathway for the waters. As they leap across their banks, they flood the open fields; orchards and groves, and herds, and men and homes, and shrines and all the sacred things they hold are swept away. And if some house remains in place despite the fury it has faced, the rising waters overtop the roof; the towers can't be seen beneath the eddies. Between the sea and land one cannot draw distinctions: all is sea, but with no shore.

One man seeks refuge on a hill, another rows in his curving boat where, just before, he'd plowed; one sails across his fields of grain or over the submerged roof of his villa; sometimes an anchor snags in a green meadow; sometimes a curving keel may graze the vines. Where grateful goats had grazed along the grass, the squat sea-lions sprawl. And undersea, the Nereids, amazed, stare hard at cities and homes and groves; through woodlands, dolphins roam; they bump against tall branches, knock and shake oak trees. The wolf now swims among the sheep; the waves bear tawny lions, carry tigers; the boar is swept along—his lightning force is useless; and the stag's swift legs can't help;

the bird that searched so long for land where he might rest, flight-weary, falls into the sea.

By now the heights are buried by sea swells; the surge—a thing no one has seen before—beats on the mountaintops. Most men are drowned among the waves; and those who have escaped, deprived of food, become starvation's prey.

The land that lies between Boeotia and Oeta's fields is Phocis—fertile land as long as it was land, but now a mass the sudden surge had changed into a vast sea-tract. There, Mount Parnassus lifts, star-high, its two steep peaks that tower over clouds.

And here (the only place the flood had spared) Deucalion and his wife, in their small skiff, had landed. First, they prayed unto the nymphs of the Corycian cave, the mountain gods, and Themis—she, the goddess who foretells the future, in those early days, was still the keeper of the Delphic oracle.

One could not point to any better man, a man with deeper love for justice, than Deucalion; and of all women, none matched Pyrrha in devotion to the gods. And when Jove saw the flooded world—by now a stagnant swamp—and saw that just one man was left of those who had been myriads, that but one woman had escaped the waves—two beings who were pious, innocent—he rent the clouds, then sent out Boreas to scatter them; the sky could see again the land, and land again could see the heavens.
The fury of the sea subsided, too.
And Neptune set aside his three-pronged weapon;
the god of waters pacified the waves
and summoned sea-green Triton, bidding him
to blow on his resounding conch—a sign
for seas and streams to end the flood, retreat.
And Triton, as he rose up from the deep—
his shoulders shell-encrusted—held his conch:
a twisting hollow form that, starting from
a point, then spiraled up to a wide whorl—
the conch that, when it’s sounded in midsea,
reechoes on the shores to west and east.
Now, too, when Triton drew it to his lips—
wet with sea brine that dripped from his soaked beard—and, just as Neptune ordered, blew retreat,
the sound reached all the waters of the sea
and those that flow on land—and having heard
his call, they all obeyed: they curbed their course.
The rivers fall back, and the hills emerge;
the sea has shores once more; the riverbeds,
however full their flow, now keep it channeled;
the land increases as the waters ebb;
the soil can now be seen; and then, at last,
after that long night, trees show their bare tops
with traces of the flood—slime on their boughs.

The world had been restored to what it was.
But when Deucalion saw earth so forlorn,
a wasteland where deep silence ruled, a bare
and desolate expanse, he shed sad tears
and said to Pyrrha:

“O my wife, dear sister,
the only woman left on earth, the one
to whom I first was linked as a dear cousin
and then as husband, now we are together
in danger: all the lands both east and west
are empty now—and we alone are left:

\[\text{Latin [330–555]}\]

the sea has taken all the rest. And we
may not survive: we have no certainties—
that vision of the clouds still haunts my mind.
How would you feel, sad heart, if you’d survived
the fatal flood, but I had lost my life?
How would you, all alone, have borne the fear?
With whom would you—alone—have shared your tears?
For if the sea had swallowed you, dear wife,
I, too—believe me—would have followed you
and let the deluge drown me, too. Would I
were master of the arts my father plied;
then I, son of Prometheus, would mold
and so renew mankind—its many tribes.
But now the race of men has been reduced—
so did the gods decree—to me and you:
We are the last exemplars.”

So he said;
together they shed tears and then resolved
to plead with the celestial power, to pray
unto the sacred oracle for aid.
Then, side by side, they went without delay
to seek the waters of Cephisus’ stream;
although its waters were not limpid yet,
the river flowed along its normal bed.
They took some water and, upon their heads
and dothing, sprinkled it, then turned their steps
to holy Themis’ shrine. The roof was grimed
with pallid moss, the altars had no flame.
They reached the temple steps, and there they both
kneeled down, bent to the ground; in awe, they kissed
the cold stones, saying: “If the gods are pleased,
by righteous prayers, and their wrath can be
appeased, then tell us, Themis, by what means
the ruin of our race can be redeemed;
and, kindest goddess, help this flooded world.”
The goddess had been moved; her oracle
gave this response: “Now, as you leave the temple,
cover your heads and do not bind your clothes,
and throw behind you, as you go, the bones
of the great mother."

They are stunned, struck dumb;
and Pyrrha is the first to break their long
silence: she says she cannot do as told;
with trembling voice she begs the goddess’ pardon,
but she cannot offend her mother’s shade
by scattering her bones. Again, again,
they ponder all the oracle had said;
those words—obscure and dark—leave them perplexed.
At last, Prometheus’ son speaks words that would
allay the fears of Epimetheus’ daughter:
"I may be wrong, but I think Themis’ answer
did not involve impiety or ask
for any sacrilege. By the great mother,
the earth is meant; and bones, I think, mean stones,
which lie inside earth’s body. It is these
that we must throw behind us as we leave."

Her husband’s explanation solaced Pyrrha;
yet hope was not yet firm—for, after all,
they both were doubtful of the oracle.
But what is wrong in trying? They set out;
they veil their heads, they both ungird their clothes;
and they throw stones behind them as they go.
And yes (if those of old did not attest
the tale I tell you now, who could accept
its truth?), the stones began to lose their hardness;
they softened slowly and, in softening,
changed form. Their mass grew greater and their nature
more tender; one could see the dim beginning
of human forms, still rough and inexact,
the kind of likeness that a statue has
when one has just begun to block the marble.
Those parts that bore some moisture from the earth
became the flesh; whereas the solid parts—

whatever could not bend—became the bones.
What had been veins remained, with the same name.
And since the gods had willed it so, quite soon
the stones the man had thrown were changed to men,
and those the woman cast took women’s forms.
From this, our race is tough, tenacious; we
work hard—proof of our stony ancestry.

The other animals—arrayed in forms
of such variety—were born of earth
spontaneously; the torrid sun began
to warm the moisture that the flood had left
within the ground. Beneath that blazing heat,
soft marshes swelled; the fertile seeds
were nourished by the soil that gave them life
as in a mother’s womb; and so, in time,
as each seed grew, it took on its own form.

So, when the Nile, the stream with seven mouths,
recedes from the soaked fields and carries back
its waters to the bed they had before,
and slime, still fresh, dries underneath the sun,
the farmers, turning over clods, discover
some who are newly born, who’ve just begun
to take their forms, and others who are still
unfinished, incomplete—they’ve not achieved
proportion; and indeed, in one same body,
one part may be alive already, while
another is a lump of shapeless soil.
For, tempering each other, heat and moisture
engender life; the union of these two
produces everything. Though it is true
that fire is the enemy of water,
moist heat is the creator of all things;
discordant concord is the path life needs.

Latin [582-403]