BOOK I

Bodies, I have in mind, and how they can change to assume
new shapes—I ask the help of the gods, who know the trick:
inspire me now, change me, let me glimpse the secret
and sing, better than I know how, of the world's birthing,
the creation of all things from first to the very latest.
    Before there was water and dry land, or even heaven and
        earth,
Nature was all the same: what men imagine as "chaos,"
that jumble of elemental stuff, a lifeless heap,
with neither Sun to shed its light, nor Moon to wax
and wane, nor earth poised in its atmosphere of air.
If there was land and sea, there was no discernible shoreline,
no way to walk on the one, or swim or sail in the other.
In the gloom and murk, vague shapes appeared for a moment,
        loomed,
and then gave way, unsaying themselves and the world as well.
Cold and hot contended, as wet warred with dry,
soft battled with hard, and buoyance with weightiness
in default of reason and order, until, at the last, a god
sparked, glowed, then shone like a beam of light to define
earth and the heavens and separate water from hard ground
and clear crystalline air from the shifting masses of cloud,
freeing the muddled elements and letting them each become
for the first time its own distinguishable self.
Then, in a further work of wonder, in combination,
he bound them all together to make the harmonious cosmos
in which we can live, on which we all have to rely.
Upward the aether flowed, as is its nature to do,
forming the vault of the sky; the air we breathe collected
over the stolid earth; and water, learning its heft
and weight, began to flow downward, spilling into seas
that seemed to hold in embrace the masses of pristine land.
That god, whoever he was, once he had sorted the chaos

into its various parts, molded the earth he'd made
into a huge ball, rounded on every side,
and the waters heaved and spread in waves, currents, and tides
over which like currents of air blew in freshening winds.
Springs bubbled up, and ponds and still pools, and the rivers
flowed down from the uplands in babble or roar to the greater
lakes and on into distant and endlessly restless seas.
At his divine order, the plains stretched out and the valleys,
bosky groves, and woods sprang up and into leaf,
and craggy mountains arose with their curtain walls of rock.
The scheme of the god informed the way the vault of the sky
divided itself into two zones on the left and right
with a fifth zone in the middle—just as the earth divides
in exactly the same way, with unendurable heat
in the center, and impossible cold at each end with snowdrifts
and dismal expanses of ice, but between these unwelcoming places
are two more temperate regions, mixing the heat and cold.
Think of the intricate way matter sorted itself,
the relative weights of the elements sifting to form the patterns
we take for granted—with fire lighter than air, and water
lighter than earth. By such contrivances was the god
able to arrange the way in which mists can form
and turn into clouds, which crash to produce great peals of
thunder
and jagged flashes of lightning that fill the air as they filled
the mind of the maker first, which is why they do not reduce
the world to smithereens. The quarrel, fierce as it seems,
is yet fraternal, familiar, a controversy of brothers—
East Wind lives with the Arabs and sometimes sojourns in Persia;
West Wind settled himself where the Sun goes down every night;
North Wind claimed for himself the barren Scythian steppes;
and South Wind chose what was left, the region of fogs and
rainstorms.
Over them all is the dome of utterly weightless aether
the god put there to contain them, like a dream of purity.
Once these distinctions were made and matter began to
behave,
the sky displayed its array of stars in their constellations
the murk had hitherto concealed, a twinkling template
of order. The sea upon which they shone quickened with fish,
and the woods and meadows with game, and the air with
twittering birds,
each order of creature settling into its home.

A paradise, it would seem, except that the word was lacking,
as all words were, for the last creation had not yet happened—
of the one who should understand his dominion over the rest.
Man was born: some say the god perfected the world,
creating of his divine substance the race of humans;
others maintain that we come from the natural order of things,
the aether having left some trace of its heavenly self
for Prometheus to mix with new-fallen rain water
and mold into a shape not unlike that of the gods.
But one way or another, man arose—erect,
standing tall as the other beasts do not, with our faces
set not to gaze down at the dirt beneath our feet
but upward toward the sky in pride or perhaps nostalgia.
In such a way was the earth, so lately a rough-and-tumble
affair, changed, transformed to an intricate, ordered marvel
on which for the first time mankind was able to walk,
looking about himself in wonder and gratitude.
That first age was golden: all was then fresh and new
and so arranged that out of spontaneous goodness, men,
without the compulsion of laws or fear of punishment, kept
their faith with one another, behaving with decency,
fairness, justice, and generosity. Plaques of bronze
with their formal legal phrases and barely veiled threats
were as yet unimagined. There were no benches with judges
glaring
down at the crowds of perpetrators and victims, angry,
fearful, or sullen, but suppliants every one. The tall
pines grew undisturbed: no shipwrights came to cut
and hew them into masts for ships to plow the distant
and treacherous seas. In those days, men remained at home
in pleasant cities that needed neither walls nor moats,
no straight trumpets or curving horns to summon troops
to take up arms. There was never occasion for soldiers. Men
lived entire lifetimes in peace and ease, as earth,
without the scratching of plows or prodding of hoes, produced
whatever they needed for sustenance. Gentle creatures, they
roamed
abundant meadows to gather the fruits, berries, and nuts
that hung from the boughs of bowers of a bliss they took for
granted.
Jupiter's mighty oak trees showered the earth with acorns,
and spring with its temperate promise extended throughout
the year.

Gentle winds from the west tussled the meadows of flowers
that popped up, unprompted as the laughter of small children.
Wheat grew wild in the fields; streams flowed with milk
and nectar; and honey dripped like sap from hives in the trees.
When Saturn died and Jove succeeded as ruler, the silver
age began with another race of men, lesser
than those of the golden age that was gone—but they were better
than those of the age of bronze that followed in time's declension.
Now there were four seasons, with parching summer heat
and the biting cold of winter with a glitter of ice and a howling
of winds that seemed malevolent. Men began to seek shelter
not in caves and thickets but now in wattled huts.
They learned from their desperation to sow small seeds in furrows
and toil behind the bullocks that strained under heavy yokes.
Next came the age and the race of bronze, of sterner stuff,
hard men ready to take up the weapons of war, crude,
even savage fellows and yet by no means wicked.
The age of iron came last, and with it came pouring forth,
as from a smelter's fire, a river of molten evil.
Modesty fled the earth; truth was rare; and honor
disappeared. In their places were snares, deceit and greed,
and violence everywhere, with envy egging it on.
Men spread sails to the winds to cross the heaving water
on keels of pines that had lorded it over their mountainsides.
The earth itself, which before had been, like air and sunshine,
a treasure for all to share, was now crisscrossed with lines
men measured and marked with boundary posts and fences.
Dissatisfied now with the yield from the plowshares' surface
scratchings,
mankind began to attack the earth with picks and shovels
to delve down in her innards for gold the gods had hidden
as deep sometimes as the Styx itself. It was greed that dug
with iron tools, and then took up the weapons of iron
in a blood lust after loot, and the gold ran red with gore.
Men discovered brigandage, lived by banditry, stole
and killed—strangers of course, but also their own houseguests.
Fathers-in-law were right to fear their daughters' husbands,
and brothers as often as not were at their brothers' throats.
Husbands strangled their wives for dower money, and wives
dreamt—not always idly—of the deaths of wealthy husbands.
Stepmothers in kitchens cooked up their deadly potions,
and sons consulted with seers to discover how much longer
they had to wait before their sires would leave the estate.

Decency had become a memory, even a joke,
and Justice, the last immortal, gathered her robes about her,
knowing she had no place here, and fled the blood-soaked earth.
This was the time the giants decided to make their assault
on the high gods, piling the hugest mountains skyward
even up to the stars—until the almighty father,
hurling thunderbolts earthward, smashed their impiety, shattered
Olympus, and then dislodged Pelion from Ossa
and onto their mangled bodies to bathe the ground in gore.
From the soaked and reddened soil sprang up a race of men
contemptuous of the gods and altogether unruly,
passionate, and bloodthirsty, being the children of blood.
Then Saturn's son, the father of gods, looked down from
his seat,
groaned aloud in disgust, and recalled Lycaon's feast,
the infamy of which was yet new in the world.
What to do? How should the wrath of mighty Jove
express itself in a worthy way? He called a council
of all the gods, and promptly they came to attend upon him.
When the sky is clear, you can look and see their glittery path
we call the Milky Way. On this *allée* their procession
passed in state to the royal dwelling places of him
they call in awe the Thunderer. To left and right were the halls
of the gods of the first rank, their porticoes now crowded
with lesser deities craning to watch how they all assembled
for their conclave on what we might call heaven's Palatine Hill.
The gods had taken their places within the marble chamber,
when the king of the gods seated himself on his lofty throne
and, leaning upon his scepter, shook his head three times,
his hair fluffing each time as below earth's skies and seas
trembled in their response. And yet once more, and then
the god spoke: "Lords, there was a time when giants
with dragons' feet assaulted our fortress here in the sky.
That was a terrible time, but the present danger is worse,
coming from every corner of earth that Ocean enfolds.
The race of men is become vile, and I am resolved
to destroy them, every one. This I swear, by the Styx
and the other rivers that run deep in the underworld.
This is a dreadful prospect, but when there's no hope of cure
for a gangrenous limb, the surgeon's knife is the better choice
than to watch the infection spread. Fauns, satyrs, nymphs,
and demigods deserve our care and solicitude.
We have not allowed them places here with us in the heavens;

let us therefore protect their groves and mountainsides,
where they may continue to live in a measure of peace and quiet—
a small thing to ask, but most unlikely to happen
so long as the likes of Lycaon live. They are but small game
to those who know no limits and even plot against me,
the master of thunderbolts and lord of all the gods."
At this there was clamor and babble of outrage and dismay,
and calls for justice and vengeance. As here, when a crew of madmen
and rogues conspired to blot the name of Rome with Caesar's
blood, and we all felt horror as well as fear—for great
Augustus first but also each man for himself
in the general wreck of things (Augustus, you must have delighted
in your countrymen's show of affection); so was Jupiter moved
and even pleased. He raised his hand in signal for silence
into which he spoke: "Be not afraid. Lycaon is punished.
What he did and what I thereafter did I will tell you.
It had reached my ears that the men of this new age were evil.
To confirm these reports and judge for myself, I descended to earth
in human form and wandered from place to place, my anger
first welling up and then giving way to grief, grief
at what I saw on all sides in the countryside and towns,
wretchedness and meanness. The reports had been understated.
In something close to despair, I approached the royal seat
of Arcadian kings, a place with a terrible reputation,
and there put off my disguise and announced myself a god.
Some of the common people thereupon did me reverence,
but Lycaon, their king, was scornful and mocked their simple prayers:
'Do not be quick to believe. I shall determine, myself,
whether he be an immortal and one of the gods, as he boasts,
or only an arrogant faker.' His plan, at the start, was straightforward—
to kill me and demonstrate I was clearly and merely mortal.
But then it grew complicated, as such undertakings do.
He took a Molossian hostage, butchered him there on the spot,
and threw his flesh into kettles and onto the grill to roast.
These were the dainties he served at the welcoming banquet he gave
to celebrate my arrival—and also his own departure,
for this was where I destroyed the table, house, and household.
Lycaon fled to the woods, in terror more than shame,

and there he howled and howled, tried to speak . . . but could not.
Imagine how foam flecks at his jaws, and his body hair
thickens and mats. His hands deform, and his arms are twisted
into a wolf's forelegs. Lycaon turns into a beast
but with still recognizable eyes, and the same expression he had,
only now his cruel glare is directed perforce at sheep.
But the fall of one royal house is only a gesture, an omen,
when everywhere is fury and rage reigns supreme.
Let them all suffer severe and immediate penalty. Let them
feel the pain they have each and all so well deserved."
When he had spoken, some voiced approval, while others, struck
by his terrible meaning, gave their assent in solemn silence,
which may have allowed for at least a degree of the grief they felt
for the loss of the race of men. What would become of the world
without these creatures to bring incense to their holy altars?
Would there be only beasts now running wild on the prairies
and plains? The master of gods commanded them all to keep faith
and trust as much in his mercy as they relied on his justice,
reassuring that what he had once made he could make
again but different and better—a new order of men.
He took up his thunderbolts and had already raised his arm,
but then, staying his hand, worried that such a great
blast might even endanger the heavens, that everything could
go up at once in that general conflagration the Fates
had said would bring an end to the universe he loved,
he lowered his arm, put aside the Cyclopean thunderbolts,
and decided on yet another way to inflict his will,
destroying the human race with rain that fell from the sky
in torrents and waters that rose in answer from out of the sea.
First he shuts North Wind into Aeolus' cave with all
the winds that scatter the clouds. Then he lets South Wind loose
to fly with soppy wings over darkening skies, his beard
dripping with moisture, as water flows from the hair on his head
and his wings and garments drip. He squeezes the ripened clouds
with his huge hands, and they crack and then gush forth their juice
to pour down rain on the land that lies exposed below.
Iris, goddess of rainbows and Juno's messenger, draws
the moisture up to replenish the rapidly emptying clouds,
and down on the earth the rain pelts and batters the crops,
ruining all that the farmers have worked and prayed to achieve.
The ripening grain in their fields is flattened into the mud,

and the work of a whole year is gone in a couple of hours.
Jove is not content with the waters that his own skies
can sluice down but asks his brother who rules the seas
to add what he can with waves that now batter the shores.
The river gods he summons to attend in his council chamber,
and there he issues his orders, commands them to open their doors,
overflow dikes and levies, and let their currents run free,
racing wherever they will to tear toward the turbulent sea.
Neptune raises his trident and smashes it down on the earth,
and waters gush, as the rivers leap like flying fish
up and into the air, over their banks and bounds,
to frisk in the wide meadows and play in the plains, orchards,
and kitchen gardens, and then, to try the doors and windows
of barns and houses, of temples and shrines, sweeping away
tools, toys, and precious heirlooms as refuse and junk.
The flimsier houses wash away; the sturdier stand
fast as the water rises up to their eaves and gables,
submerges them, and hides them, beneath its impassive surface.
Ocean extends its shores, which after a time meet
and disappear as everywhere is awash with water.
Here is a man who has taken refuge on top of a hill,
a rapidly dwindling islet; here is a man in a boat,
rowing with oars in the very place he was recently plowing;
here a man in a dinghy sails over the roof of his barn,
and trolls his line for fish caught in the top of his elm.
Where plowshares once had furrowed the meadows, anchors tore
the bottom's clods. Grapevines climbed toward the keels of boats.
Where kids had frisked, now seal, walrus, and sea calf lolled.
Nereids swam in wonder through gateways, over towers,
and in and out of the windows of deserted buildings of men.
Dolphins romped in the woods and darted like huge birds
from branch to branch of trees, above which, in the flood,
desperate wolves were swimming alongside helpless sheep.
Lions and tigers, living and dead, drifted at random,
with the swift stags and the sturdy boars . . . all swept away.
From black skies the weary birds, scouting a perch,
fell exhausted at last into that endless sea
that in its greed had devoured entire mountain ranges.
Whoever hadn't drowned outright—here and there, some sailors
survived in their boats—perished inexorably of hunger.
Between the lands of Boeotia and Oeta, somewhere in Phocis—

or actually it would have been somewhere *over* Phocis, afloat
on the waters that washed Parnassus, all but submerging its twin
peaks—in a little skiff, Deucalion and his wife
came aground on almost the only ground there was,
for which that couple gave thanks to the nymphs and mountain spirits,
and to Themis, the goddess who, from her shrine, foretold the future.
In all the world, before the deluge, there was no better
man than this, nor as upright, nor was there a woman more
respectful of the gods. Only this man remained
of the myriads that once had defiled creation; only
this woman was left. And Jupiter looked down,
saw them as innocent, worthy, reverent, and rent the skies
to free North Wind and have him disperse those vengeful clouds
and restore a gentler blue. The turbulent sea subsided
at once, as the lord of ocean laid his trident down
and calmed the swell. From the froth, he called forth mighty Triton,
his shoulders thick with mollusks and seaweed, to blow his all
but deafening conch to signal the rivers' and streams' retreat.
He lifts the spiral shell to his lips, and the roar resounds
from its widening whorls to reach the horizon and even beyond
to the shores of the rising and setting Sun. The waters hear
and obey, and the sea has shores again, and rivers banks,
and the waters run in accustomed channels, revealing once more
hilltops and then whole hills, and then the upland meadows,
in islets that expand and join. At last there are crests
of trees, still covered by underwater slime that the flood
has left, and their branches, and then, once again, the bark of their trunks.
The world was restored, but empty. Deucalion looked about him,
heard the oppressive silence, and burst into copious tears.
With effort he addressed Pyrrha, his wife, saying,
"O my dear wife, the only woman alive in the world,
our ties of blood and the marriage couch have joined us together,
as has our misfortune also—we have survived, but alone.
The others are gone, washed away . . . as we may be ourselves,
for I do not yet altogether trust this relenting. Our perch
may prove to be a further torture, raising our hopes
only to dash them again when the rains recommence to float us
free and onward to death to join the rest of mankind.

And yet, it could have been even worse than it is. Imagine
yourself on this strand in this same boat, but all alone,
without my help or my consolation. And for my part,
had I survived to this moment but without you, I should plunge
into the depths to follow and rejoin you, quite unable
to bear without you the scrap of a widower's empty life.
Prometheus, my father, would have known what to do to restore
the nations of earth, breathe life somehow into inert clay,
and repair the disaster. But only we remain, the relicts
of all our kind. The will of the heavenly gods is harsh—
and should we survive, how can we not imagine those things
that might have come to pass?" He broke off speaking and wept,
again, and they wept together and resolved to appeal to the heavens
and learn from the oracles what to think and what to do.
They went to Cephisus' stream, turgid still but confined
more or less to its former banks, and they sprinkled its holy drops
upon their heads and clothing, having done which, they turned
to the shrine of the goddess, fouled with moss and seaweed, its fires
dead of course, but they fell prone on the steps and kissed
with reverent lips the stones and prayed the prayers of the righteous:
"Themis, tell us, is heaven's terrible wrath abated?
What must we do, o gentle and merciful goddess? Tell us,
how may we look to restore a world that is overwhelmed?"
The goddess was moved and spoke: "Go from this place, with heads
covered and robes thrown open, and fling the bones of your mother
behind you as you walk." What? They look at each other,
speechless, appalled. It is Pyrrha who breaks the astonished silence.
"My mother's bones? Assuming that I could retrieve them, how
could I dare defile them so? What can the goddess's words
have meant? Not what they seem! The heavens sport with us yet."
They mull over the puzzle, trying to read aright
the difficult text, and at last, the son of Prometheus soothes
Epimetheus' daughter with comforting words: "What it has to mean—
for the gods would never command us to do so wicked a thing—
is that we must look down at the earth, which is mother to one and all,

and take up stones, which are bones of the earth's body, and throw them
behind us as we go." Pyrrha wants to believe him,
but what good will it do throwing stones over their shoulders?
It's another imposition the heavens have conjured up
to turn the last moments of human life to farce.
But what's to lose? They cover their heads, open their robes
as they were bidden, and walk, flinging pebbles and small
rocks behind them. They do not see (and who would believe it,
did we not have our ancient tradition to reassure us?)
the stones hitting the ground, losing their shape and hardness,
and growing in softness and size to a blobbiness first and then
a vaguely humanoid presence, like statues not yet completed,
but roughly blocked in marble—save that the marble is soft,
its damper parts even fleshlike, or fleshy or, say, flesh!
There seems to be a mollification, a kind of relenting,
and whatever was solid is now become hard bone, and the veins
in the rock, retaining their names and nature, are still veins
but now in arms and legs of people who move and speak,
albeit stiffly at first, and slowly as if in amazement.
The stones Deucalion flings behind him take on the shape
of men, as likewise the stones from Pyrrha assume the form
of women. And from this circumstance it came to pass
that there is a hardness in humans, or hardiness and endurance,
for we are the children of stones whose origin speaks in us still.
And the other forms of life, the richly various fauna?
What of them? They are here. The earth somehow produced them
out of its own substance, as the rays of the Sun baked dry
the muck and slime of the flood, and the marshes basked in a heat
intense enough that the air shimmered and solid shapes
danced in the middle distance, dreams of themselves. From the mud,
all manner of creatures were spawned. They say that each year the Nile
floods its valley and then, in season, returns to its bed,
leaving the farmers to turn the newly fertilized earth
in their rich fields. They plow and they see how the new mud
teems with animate creatures, sluglike, blind, unfinished,
but wriggling into existence, having appeared from the union
of moisture and heat in the nuptial bed of the rich earth.
In this way all that moves and breathes came into being,
for fire and water are hostile—as lovers sometimes can be—
but out of their union there comes a miraculous teeming of life.

So, when the Sun shone down on all that alluvial muck,
it brought forth the countless forms of the creatures we see
flitting, darting, lumbering, or creeping hither and thither,
some of them much the same as those that had come before,
but others, in the ebullient creation, or call it a frenzy,
novel and strange, or even terrifying. Consider
the Python, that huge serpent that struck fear in the hearts
of those newly created men. With what possible purpose
would the earth produce from itself a monstrosity like that?
But there it of course was, coiling its scaly length
around whole mountainsides as if it would swallow them up.
The archer god, Apollo, whose accustomed targets were deer
or now and again a chamois, emptied his whole quiver
into this dreadful beast, whose blood and venom mixed
as they seethed into the ground. To keep alive the fame
of this exploit of his in the minds of men, the god in his grace
gave sanction to sacred contests called, from the name of that dread
serpent, the Pythian games. At these meets, victorious
youths in boxing or running or chariot-racing are given
garlands to wear on their brows, woven of leaves of the oak,
for the usual laurel we now award to our champions did not
then exist, and they had to make do with what there was.

Apollo, you will remember, was smitten with love for Daphne,
the beautiful daughter of Peneus (he was a river god).
It was not merely a chance infatuation, but rather
the mischief—and some say more, the positive malice—of Cupid,
enraged by the boasts and unseemly taunts of his Delian colleague.
Apollo, still in the warm glow of his triumph, having
recently slain the Python, saw Cupid bending and stringing
his bow and said: "That's a cute toy—not unlike my own.
The difference comes from the shoulder it sits on and arm that draws it
back. I have killed great beasts, game of the forest, and now
the amazing Python, that animate plague that sprawled across whole
fields and mountainsides, and all of its length was a-sprout
with numberless arrows, for mine is the greatest bow. You, sir,
merely trifle with yours as an icon or clever symbol.
But do not therefore persuade yourself that you are an archer."
The reply of the child of Venus was pleasant enough: "Sir,
your arrows can bring down anything; mine can bring you down.

If glory comes from the grandeur of what one bags, then mine
must surely exceed yours, if you are one of my trophies."
Having thus replied, he took wing, as the god
is able to do, and ascended into the air to alight
on the peak of Parnassus, where, in a pleasantly shaded recess,
he drew from his quiver arrows of opposite magic powers:
one having a gold tip—it is razor-sharp—
and causing attraction and kindling love; the other, dull,
crude, and tipped with lead, producing extreme distaste.
This latter shaft he fitted onto his bow and fired
into the heart of Peneus' daughter. And then, with the gold
arrow, he smote Apollo, piercing the god to the marrow.
He burned at once, with passionate ardor; regrettably, she
was not disposed to respond. Indeed, she fled from the thought
and name of love, retreating into the woods to live
in quiet and solitude, a devotée of Diana,
a hermit-huntress. Suitors presented themselves, but she
fled them and raced on familiar paths, her hair flowing loose
and bouncing brightly behind her. Marriage? Her father complained
that she owed him a son-in-law, that she owed him grandchildren.
She blushed and lowered her eyes, or threw her arms round his neck
and pleaded with him, "Papa, allow to me what Diana's
father has given to her; let me stay as I am,
a maiden, and my own woman." What father could have refused?
He granted her wish—but the world and Nature had other notions,
for what man can ignore a breathtaking beauty like hers?
That double-edged gift undoes her, for Phoebus sees her and promptly
longs for her, to have her, marry her, possess her!
He knows better, his mantic gift not having left him. . . .
But still he longs, and therefore hopes, and therefore believes
the impossible. As a cleared field is set afire
and the stubble bursts into flame, or as hedges ignite from a traveler's
torch that has brushed its branches and blaze up into the night,
so does the god burn, is consumed by the fires of passion,
his heart sizzles, his brain fries in the fat of his rapture
and vain hope. He watches as that ponytail of hers
whips the innocent air, and he all but cries out in pain.
He sees her eyes, her lips, her marvelous fingers, her wrists