

V I R G I L

from *The Georgics*

BOOK I

What tickles the corn to laugh in rows, and by what star  
to steer the plow, and how to train the vine to elms,  
good management of flocks and herds, the expertise bees need  
to thrive—my lord, Mæcenas, such are the makings of the song  
I take upon myself to sing.

Sirs of sky,  
grand marshals of the firmament,  
O Liber of fertility, and Ceres, our sustaining queen,  
by your kind-heartedness Earth traded acorns of Epirus  
for ample ears of corn and laced spring water with new wine;  
and you, O Fauns, presiding lights of farming folk  
(come dance, O Fauns, and maiden Dryads,  
your gifts I celebrate as well); and you, Neptune, whose trident's  
booming tap on rock first fanfared to bring forth a snorting horse;  
and you, patron of shady woods, whose many hundred head  
of cattle  
fatten, pristine, in the chaparral of Ceos;  
and you, too, Pan, abandoning your native groves  
and glades of Lycæus,  
caretaker of the flocks, if Mænalus means anything at all to you,  
come to me, O god of Tegea, a friend and comforter;  
and you, Minerva,  
who first discovered olives; and that youth, too,  
creator of the crooked plow;  
Silvanus, too, who carries on his back a sturdy cypress,  
ripped up from the roots—  
a god or goddess each of you, whose care and concern is  
for land, who nurtures crops not grown from seed,  
and who dispatches onto plantings heavy showers  
from the heavens;



That's the one to fill his sheds until they're fit to burst.  
And yet before we take our implements to unfamiliar territory  
we must work to ascertain its changing weather and winds' moods,  
to learn the ways and habits of that locality—  
what's bound to flourish there, and what to fail.  
For here you'll find a crop of grain, and there grapes growing  
in thick clusters,  
and over yonder young trees thriving and grasses coming into  
green all on their own.

Can't you see how scented saffron comes from the uplands  
of Lydia,  
ivory from India, incense from soft-hearted races of Arabia;  
and we get iron from unclothed inhabitants of Pontus, slimy  
castor from the Black Sea,  
and the choice of mares for breeding from a region in north  
Greece?

Right from time's beginning, nature assigned these laws to  
last forever,  
each in its specific place, fixed such compacts from the moment  
Deucalion cast onto the world the stones from which mankind  
originated, a hardy race!

And so onward!

From the sun's first tender touch, run your mighty teams  
through fertile fields, tossing sods about  
for baking heat to break them down to dust.  
But if you've not got high yielding soil you will do well  
to rake it with a shallow sock by the shine of that time's  
brightest star,  
to ensure either that weeds won't block the way  
for wholesome crops  
or that a bare sandy plot retains whatever moisture's there.

And so take turns to let the land lie fallow after it's been harvested,  
let fields left to themselves recuperate and renew themselves  
with firmer footing  
or, with a switch of season, set down, say, tawny emmer or einkorn,  
where once you'd gathered an outpour of pulses

with their rustling pods, or drawn spindly vetch  
and bitter lupins' brittle stalks and susurrating stems.  
For it's a fact and true, a crop of flax will parch a place,  
as will wild oats, as will a sprawl of poppies doused in their  
forgetfulness.  
That said, you'll lighten loads of routine by rotation.  
Don't spare dry land its fill of dung,  
don't hesitate to spread a heap of grimy ashes on spent fields.  
While your land gets a chance to rest by changing crops  
don't imagine for a second that all that time your fallow isn't  
earning a return.

Frequently there's much to gain by setting flame to idle acres  
and letting their thin stubble burn—either because it helps  
engender some weird force and rich feed for the soil  
or because the fire scalds all its faults and failings  
and sweats out baleful moisture.  
Or is it that the heightened heat unclogs the pores and  
opens passages  
through which the sap ascends into new shoots  
or makes clay even firmer by closing yawning waterways  
so that it isn't blasted by a fall of rain or sun's excessive benison  
or the bite of freezing winds that utter from the north?

And as for that, great is the good he does a field who with a  
mattock breaks apart  
its lumps and clumps, then with a wicker hurdle harrows it,  
earning a look he likes from Ceres high on her Olympian heights,  
just as he contributes much who raises flat land into ridges  
by plowing one way, then cross-plowing,  
and regularly works his lands and keeps a tight rein on his holding.

The countryman should pray for wet summers and mild winters;  
corn delights in hiemal dust. Then the country's in good heart—  
there's nothing brings out better in places such as Mysia,  
and Gargarus can be amazed by its own harvests.



so that by careful thought and deed you'd hone them bit by bit,  
those skills, to coax from furrows blades of corn  
and spark shy flame from veins of flint.

That was the first time ever hollowed alders sailed on water,  
and seagoing men began to number, and then name, the stars—  
the Pleiades, the Hyades, and Lycaon's child, the glittering  
Great Bear.

Then men came up with ways to try to trap wild animals, by  
setting snares  
of sticky sticks for birds and rounding game in glades with packs  
of hunting hounds.

And by this time someone was dragging rivers with a net,  
plumbing their depths; another trawled the open sea with his  
soaking mesh.

Then came tempered iron and the sawblade's rasping rhythm  
(for earlier man was wont to split his wood with wedges).  
All this before the knowledge and know-how which ensued.  
Hard work prevailed, hard work and pressing poverty.

It was Ceres who first taught to men the use of iron plows—  
that time wild strawberries and oak berries were scanty in the  
sacred groves

and Dodona was miserly with her support.

Soon growing grain grew into harder work.

Blight rusted stalks, and thistles mustered into view to lord it over  
all that you accomplished; crops began to flounder, a rough  
growth to advance—  
goose-grass, or "cleavers", and bristling burrs—while wild oats  
and dreaded darnel ruled head and shoulder over your  
well-tended plot.

So, unless you're set to spend the whole day tackling weeds  
with your hoe, and making noise to scare off birds, and slashing  
back with hooks  
the branches darkening the lands, and all your prayers for rain  
are answered,  
alas, my friend, heaps of grain next door will stare you in the face

and you'll be raiding oaks for acorns to ease the ache of hunger.

Now let me tell about the tools and tackle unflagging farmers  
had to have  
in their arsenal, for none has sowed or saved a crop without them.  
The plowshare first, and the curved plow's solid board,  
and Ceres' hefty carts for sheaves,  
threshing rakes and sledges, and the heavy-weighted mattock.  
And then the lighter implements of wickerwork—arbutus gates  
and hurdles,  
and Iacchus' marvellous riddle which serves to sort the chaff  
from grain.  
So think ahead—stockpile a cache of these in time  
if you're to earn the satisfactions of that heavenly estate.

To make the plow's main curve, fashion by force  
a pliant elm while it's still growing in the ground.  
Then to its stock fit and fasten an eight-foot pole,  
earth-timbers, and a twin-backed beam.  
Light lime you will have kept aside to make the yoke,  
and for the tiller a length of beech to steer it from behind.  
Hung in the hearth, smoke will season wood components.

I could, if I'd not seen you back away from such concerns,  
regale you with a store of ancient learning.  
To begin: grade the threshing floor with the heavy roller,  
taking pains to tamp it tight with chalk  
so that no growth breaks through and it holds firm and  
doesn't crumble.  
Let no blights of pests or parasites squat there  
for often, underground, the mouse sets up his house and home  
and the groping mole excavates a bolt-hole  
and you come upon a shrew or field mouse in a hollow  
and other creatures earth turns out—the beetle scurries  
to spoil heaps of wheat, the emmet hurries to safeguard against  
a want some rainy day.



until mid-winter's whelming showers slap you in the face.  
Then, too, it's time to plant linseed and seeds of poppies  
(loved by Ceres),  
time to tie yourself to the plow while the still-dry earth  
accepts it and the settled weather lingers.

Set beans in springtime, the time alfalfa happens in collapsing  
furrows,  
and millet clamours for its annual attention,  
when Taurus, gilt-horned and incandescent, gets the new year  
up and running, and the Dog succumbs to his advance.  
But if you've been working towards a strong output of wheat  
or you're heartset on hardy ears of corn,  
hold off until one of the Seven Sisters steals away from you at dawn  
and the Star of Knossos, the shining Northern Crown, retires  
before you entrust to the ground seed you've pledged  
and invest in soil that couldn't keep its promise to repay  
the hopes of a whole year.  
Some crospmen thought that they could not delay till May  
began to wane  
and the crops that they were counting on jeered them  
with hollow heads of oats.

But if you're the kind who's satisfied with sowing seeds  
of vetch and tares  
and second-rate green beans and don't look down  
even on Egyptian pulses,  
you won't mistake in any way the signs a setting Boëtes transmits—  
you might as well get on with it, and carry on your sowing  
until you're up to here in frosts!

This is the very reason the sun god is so faithful to his path  
between each of the dozen fixed divisions of his orbit.  
Five spheres make up the heavens, of which one, and only one,  
is always blushing brightly and always flushed by his flaming fire.  
And all around, left and right, a cyanic realm stretches  
far as far can be,

hard frosts and ice and gloomy spills.  
Between this and the middle sphere a pair of zones is given  
by godly grace to pitiful man, through both of which  
a way's laid down  
and the series of signs takes turns along their roundabout way.  
And the universe, just as it rises to the lofty slopes  
of the Riphæan ranges,  
pitches downward in the south, in Africa.  
There's a pole that always looms above us, while its counterpart  
lies underfoot in Stygian dark and the infernal shades.  
Here the sky's enormous serpent slithers in and out,  
the image of a river, between the Big and Little Dipper,  
those constellations that disdain to be touched or tainted  
by Atlantic's waters.

There, or so they say, either it's the dead of night  
and so still—a black shadow stretching over everything  
as if forever—  
or dawn comes back to them on its way back from us,  
daylight's chaperon,  
and, when morning first inspires us with its puffing horses,  
there the lamps of evening are coming on, and glow.

And so we have the power to anticipate uncertain weather—  
the day to reap, the day to sow—  
and when the time is right to plunge our oars into  
untrustworthy seas, when to launch an armed armada,  
when's best, even, to fell a pine-tree in the forest.

It's not for nothing we keep an eye on sky for signs  
that come and go, or on the year's four equal parts.  
Say the farmer's grounded by a cold snap's spell of rain,  
he'll seize the time for odd jobs he'd be rushing when it's fine.  
The plowman points the blunted share with hammer blows  
or gouges troughs from trees,  
or brands the herds, or checks the stocks of grain;  
another whittles stakes and twin-pronged forks

Night's the best for cutting lighter crops, night's best  
for well-drained meadows,  
for then there is no lack of lingering moisture.

There's a certain sort of man who by winter firelight  
stays up all night edging iron implements.  
And all the while, with soothing songs lightening the load of  
her routine,  
his helpmeet runs across her loom her rattling reed,  
and in the hearth a flame reduces the sweet-scented must,  
its bubbles simmering in a pot she skims with brushstrokes  
of broad leaves.

While, on the other hand, in midday's highest heat,  
you're better off  
knocking red or ruddy grain or bruising parched produce  
on the threshing floor.

Plow on days you'd strip to the waist; sow the same.  
Winter's the time for farmers to unwind. In colder months  
countrymen enjoy themselves, taking turns to entertain.  
Congenial winter is a treat: it banishes their woes and worries,  
as if a laden ship just docked in a safe haven  
and sailors had begun to decorate its stern with garlands.  
Still and all, that season has its labours, they file away the hours—  
the gather-up of acorns, bayberries and olive-berries,  
and the purple berries of the myrtle.

What's more, it's time for you to set out traps for herons,  
cast nets for stags,  
to course the long-lugged hare and fell a hind  
by hurling your coarse hempen slings the way they do  
in the Balearics—  
all this while snow falls from the heavens, and floods advance  
their loads of ice.

What can I tell about the storms of autumn and its signs,  
or, even, when the days are closing down and summer  
sun's abating,  
what then must men beware of? Or, say, when spring  
comes tumbling

down in showers and crops of corn are tall already,  
their green stalks standing proud with sap?  
How often I have seen, just as the farmer's driven in to reap  
the flaxen field and top the fragile barley crop,  
the clash of squalls and gales in battle mode  
as they ripped up from roots the swathes of ripe and ready corn  
and held them up, the way malefic whirlwinds  
toss beardless stalks around the place, hither and yon.

At other times a rush of water cascades from the sky,  
clouds spill their mass into the foul darkness of a deluge,  
as the heavens open and the rainfall wipes the smiles  
off the faces of the crop the oxen worked so hard  
to make. Ditches fill to the brim, rampant channels overflow,  
the sea rages up each boiling inlet.

Then Jupiter, squire of the sky, straddling the night clouds,  
dispatches  
from his gleaming hand a thunderbolt and makes  
the whole world quake.

Wild beasts take off, and everywhere human hearts  
are laid low in a panic. He hurls that blazing dart  
onto Athos, Rhodope and the peaks of Ceraunia;  
south winds redouble and rains intensify;  
now the great groves in the gale, and now the shores,  
burst into tears.

So, in apprehension, keep an eye on each month's constellations,  
and note where the cold star of Saturn steals away to,  
and in which orbits the planet Mercury is wandering.  
Above all else, venerate the gods and pay your annual offerings  
to Ceres, when the grass is in good heart,  
at the very end of winter when spring brings on clear skies.  
Then lambs are fit, wine's at its best.  
Sleep's pure delight, and on the heights deep shadows lie.  
Have all your workers be worshippers of that goddess,  
and offer milk and honey and mild wine,  
and march a victim three times around fresh crops for luck

while all the others celebrate, a band of allies in support.  
Let them implore her loudly to come and rest with them,  
but stay the hand of any one who'd lay a sickle

to a single ear of corn

who has not wreathed his head with oak leaves in her honour  
and made up dances and sung hymns to her.

And so that we might be prepared to read unerring clues—  
anticipate heatwaves and showers and winds precipitating cold—  
he himself, the Father, decreed what each moon phase  
would mean, the sign by which south winds subside,  
what always indicates that farmers keep their teams in stalls  
and near to hand. The minute winds begin to swell  
and seas to surge in rage, a crackling crash  
sounds loud up in the mountains, chaotic noises echo  
far along the coast and murmurs in woodlands increase.  
Then the waves are in no mood to bear a ship  
and cormorants dash back from sea and bring their screeches  
to the shore, water-hens more used to waterways  
play on dry land—a sign for herons to forsake  
the marshes and weave their way high in the sky.  
And you can readily predict impending gales  
by shooting stars that blaze their way through the night sky  
and leave a white trail printed there.  
You'll see airy chaff and fallen leaves afloat on waves,  
down and feathers fluttering there.

But then, when from the quarters of the north wind  
lightning flashes  
and from the home place of the east- and west-winds  
thunder rumbles,  
the countryside's awash with the overwhelm of ditches  
and seafarers furl their soaking sails.

A spill of rain should never catch you unawares,  
for either you'll have seen soaring cranes seek protection  
in the bottoms,

a heifer face the sky suspiciously and work its nose to sniff the wind,  
sweet-singing swallows circle round a lake,  
and heard the frogs stuck in the mud and croaking  
their old grumpy sounds.

More often you'll see ants transporting eggs along  
a narrow, well-worn way  
from their safest shelter, or a mighty rainbow bending down  
to take a drink, or as they evacuate their feeding grounds  
a cavalcade of squawky rooks.

Next, a host of seabirds and those contented rummaging  
in grassland swamps of Asia Minor or pools along the river Cayster  
mimic each other by splashing spray onto their upper bodies,  
now plunging headfirst into waves, now spurting underwater,  
so that you'd think they're revelling in the ordinary  
routines of washing.

Then a crow, strutting the deserted shore,  
proclaims in its mean caw, Rain, rain, and then more rain.

In truth, even in the dark of night, young women busy  
carding wool,  
can foretell a storm's approach: they notice in their lighted lamps  
a sputtering, and watch spent wicks begin to clot and harden.  
And it's as easy to predict sunny days and stretches  
of clear weather  
in the wake of heavy showers if you're attentive to the signs.  
For the points of stars won't then appear blunted  
nor the moon's own beams rise up as though it borrowed  
light from its brother moon  
nor clouds like wispy fleeces be borne across the heavens.  
Along the strand, kingfishers—favourites of  
the sea-nymph, Thetis—  
won't extend their wings in the warm sun  
nor filthy lazing swine think of tossing with their snouts  
the bedding in their sties.  
Instead, the clouds determine to hang heavy on the lowlands,  
while, at sunfall, night's silent raptor watches from above  
and wastes its time hooting charms and hexes.

High in the skies Nisus comes into view, a sparrow-hawk,  
and Scylla pays the price for that lock of reddish hair she stole.  
Whenever she goes flying by, splitting the heavens,  
there he'll be, her father and her mortal foe, spitting screeches  
and in hot pursuit; yes, where Nisus takes himself up and away  
there she'll ever be, slicing heaven with her wings  
and cutting it to pieces.

Then ravens strain their voices to pour forth their one pure note,  
three times or four,  
and, perched high on their roosts, croak from their green shade  
in ways that we don't understand but with better  
than their customary cheer.  
How it seems to lift their hearts, when a rain belt's passed overhead,  
to turn back to their new-hatched brood  
and their beloved nestlings.

Not that I accept, however hard I try, that they've  
the slightest talent given them by god  
nor that fate bestowed on them any shred of ancient lore.

And yet—where there are changes in the weather  
and shifts in atmosphere—  
Jupiter, the god of sky, with sodden southern winds condenses  
all that had been airy and rarefies what had been so oppressive.  
Then they have a change of heart and give themselves  
to different feelings,  
different from those when gusts were shaking up the clouds—  
and that's the cause, across the country, of concord among birds,  
of livestock lying down in peace and ravens crying out  
their hallelujahs.

It's true—you keep your eye on the fleet-footed sun  
and any run of moons, and dawn won't take you by surprise,  
nor tricks of cloudless night catch you off guard.  
For when the moon collects herself in brimming fires,  
if she is cradling an amorphous shape and sheen,  
you have "earthshine"  
and spills of rain are on the way to those who hoe  
the fields and row the waves.

But if she blushes like a maiden there'll be a breeze;  
the advent of the wind precipitates a flush on the fresh face of  
the moon.

But if, on her fourth morning (that most reliable of all),  
she sallies through an open sky, her horns unblurred,  
all that day long, and all the days that stem from it  
until month's end, you needn't waste a fret on wind or rain  
and sailors standing safe ashore may count their blessings  
and give thanks to those sea-deities, Glaucus, Panope,  
and Ino's son, Melicertes.

And the sun itself, on its way up or sliding down  
below the waves, offers signs—  
none more deserving of our heed than those attached to it as it rises  
in the morning or as it meets the winking stars. If he appears  
at dawn  
all stained with spots or hides in clouds the middle of his face  
watch out for heavy showers: there'll be a south wind  
pounding from on high  
that is no friend to trees or crops or cattle.  
But if he comes pushing through thick clouds in all directions  
like bright spokes of a section of a wheel  
or if the goddess of the dawn rises wanly  
from her consort's saffron couch  
beware, alas, there's nothing you can do for them, your ripe  
shoots of vines,  
such heavy hail will bounce and clatter on your roof.  
This, too, when he's passed through and is retiring to the heavens,  
you'll do well to remember, for often we'll observe odd colours  
stray across his countenance—dark blues declare  
that there'll be rains, while tints of fire forecast hasty winds.  
But if those hues begin to blend with glowing red  
look out for gales and stormy clouds together.  
On such a night, spare me the thought  
that anyone would contemplate  
that he'd set sail or as much as touch the tie rope of his boat.  
But if, when he presents the day and then retracts it,  
his face is just as clear both times, your storm fears



and gods above did not think it a shame that we,  
with our own blood,  
would once again enrich an expanse of Emathia  
and the plains below Hæmus.  
Nothing surer than the time will come when, in those fields,  
a farmer plowing will unearth  
rough and rusted javelins and hear his heavy hoe  
echo on the sides of empty helmets and stare  
in open-eyed amazement  
at the bones of heroes he's just happened on.

O Romulus, god of our fathers, strength of our homes,  
our mother Vesta,  
who watches over our Etruscan Tiber and the palaces of Rome,  
stand back, don't block the way of this young one  
who comes to save  
a world in ruins. More than enough and long ago we paid in blood  
for the lies Laomedon told at Troy. Long, long ago  
since heaven's royal estate  
begrudged you first your place among us, Cæsar,  
grumbling of your empathies with the cares of men  
and the victories they earn.  
For right and wrong are mixed up here, there's so much  
warring everywhere,  
evil has so many faces, and there's no regard for the efforts  
of the plow. Bereft of farmers, fields have run to a riot of weeds.  
Scythes and sickles have been hammered into weapons of war.  
Look here, the east is up in arms; look there, hostilities in Germany.  
Neighbouring cities renege on what they pledged  
and launch attacks—  
the whole world's at loggerheads, a blasphemous battle,  
as when, right from the ready, steady, go, chariots quicken  
on a track  
until the driver hasn't a hope of holding the reins  
and he is carried away  
by a team that pays heed to nothing, wildly away and no control.

*(translated by Peter Fallon)*



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or dawn comes back to them on its way back from us,  
daylight's chaperon,  
and, when morning first inspires us with its puffing horses,  
there the lamps of evening are coming on, and glow.

And so we have the power to anticipate uncertain weather—  
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V I R G I L

from *The Georgics*

BOOK I

What tickles the corn to laugh in rows, and by what star  
to steer the plow, and how to train the vine to elms,  
good management of flocks and herds, the expertise bees need  
to thrive—my lord, Mæcenas, such are the makings of the song  
I take upon myself to sing.

Sirs of sky,  
grand marshals of the firmament,  
O Liber of fertility, and Ceres, our sustaining queen,  
by your kind-heartedness Earth traded acorns of Epirus  
for ample ears of corn and laced spring water with new wine;  
and you, O Fauns, presiding lights of farming folk  
(come dance, O Fauns, and maiden Dryads,  
your gifts I celebrate as well); and you, Neptune, whose trident's  
booming tap on rock first fanfared to bring forth a snorting horse;  
and you, patron of shady woods, whose many hundred head  
of cattle  
fatten, pristine, in the chaparral of Ceos;  
and you, too, Pan, abandoning your native groves  
and glades of Lycæus,  
caretaker of the flocks, if Mænalus means anything at all to you,  
come to me, O god of Tegea, a friend and comforter;  
and you, Minerva,  
who first discovered olives; and that youth, too,  
creator of the crooked plow;  
Silvanus, too, who carries on his back a sturdy cypress,  
ripped up from the roots—  
a god or goddess each of you, whose care and concern is  
for land, who nurtures crops not grown from seed,  
and who dispatches onto plantings heavy showers  
from the heavens;



That's the one to fill his sheds until they're fit to burst.  
And yet before we take our implements to unfamiliar territory  
we must work to ascertain its changing weather and winds' moods,  
to learn the ways and habits of that locality—  
what's bound to flourish there, and what to fail.  
For here you'll find a crop of grain, and there grapes growing  
in thick clusters,  
and over yonder young trees thriving and grasses coming into  
green all on their own.

Can't you see how scented saffron comes from the uplands  
of Lydia,  
ivory from India, incense from soft-hearted races of Arabia;  
and we get iron from unclothed inhabitants of Pontus, slimy  
castor from the Black Sea,  
and the choice of mares for breeding from a region in north  
Greece?

Right from time's beginning, nature assigned these laws to  
last forever,  
each in its specific place, fixed such compacts from the moment  
Deucalion cast onto the world the stones from which mankind  
originated, a hardy race!

And so onward!

From the sun's first tender touch, run your mighty teams  
through fertile fields, tossing sods about  
for baking heat to break them down to dust.  
But if you've not got high yielding soil you will do well  
to rake it with a shallow sock by the shine of that time's  
brightest star,  
to ensure either that weeds won't block the way  
for wholesome crops  
or that a bare sandy plot retains whatever moisture's there.

And so take turns to let the land lie fallow after it's been harvested,  
let fields left to themselves recuperate and renew themselves  
with firmer footing  
or, with a switch of season, set down, say, tawny emmer or einkorn,  
where once you'd gathered an outpour of pulses

with their rustling pods, or drawn spindly vetch  
and bitter lupins' brittle stalks and susurrating stems.  
For it's a fact and true, a crop of flax will parch a place,  
as will wild oats, as will a sprawl of poppies doused in their  
forgetfulness.  
That said, you'll lighten loads of routine by rotation.  
Don't spare dry land its fill of dung,  
don't hesitate to spread a heap of grimy ashes on spent fields.  
While your land gets a chance to rest by changing crops  
don't imagine for a second that all that time your fallow isn't  
earning a return.

Frequently there's much to gain by setting flame to idle acres  
and letting their thin stubble burn—either because it helps  
engender some weird force and rich feed for the soil  
or because the fire scalds all its faults and failings  
and sweats out baleful moisture.  
Or is it that the heightened heat unclogs the pores and  
opens passages  
through which the sap ascends into new shoots  
or makes clay even firmer by closing yawning waterways  
so that it isn't blasted by a fall of rain or sun's excessive benison  
or the bite of freezing winds that utter from the north?

And as for that, great is the good he does a field who with a  
mattock breaks apart  
its lumps and clumps, then with a wicker hurdle harrows it,  
earning a look he likes from Ceres high on her Olympian heights,  
just as he contributes much who raises flat land into ridges  
by plowing one way, then cross-plowing,  
and regularly works his lands and keeps a tight rein on his holding.

The countryman should pray for wet summers and mild winters;  
corn delights in hiemal dust. Then the country's in good heart—  
there's nothing brings out better in places such as Mysia,  
and Gargarus can be amazed by its own harvests.



so that by careful thought and deed you'd hone them bit by bit,  
those skills, to coax from furrows blades of corn  
and spark shy flame from veins of flint.

That was the first time ever hollowed alders sailed on water,  
and seagoing men began to number, and then name, the stars—  
the Pleiades, the Hyades, and Lycaon's child, the glittering  
Great Bear.

Then men came up with ways to try to trap wild animals, by  
setting snares  
of sticky sticks for birds and rounding game in glades with packs  
of hunting hounds.

And by this time someone was dragging rivers with a net,  
plumbing their depths; another trawled the open sea with his  
soaking mesh.

Then came tempered iron and the sawblade's rasping rhythm  
(for earlier man was wont to split his wood with wedges).  
All this before the knowledge and know-how which ensued.  
Hard work prevailed, hard work and pressing poverty.

It was Ceres who first taught to men the use of iron plows—  
that time wild strawberries and oak berries were scanty in the  
sacred groves

and Dodona was miserly with her support.

Soon growing grain grew into harder work.

Blight rusted stalks, and thistles mustered into view to lord it over  
all that you accomplished; crops began to flounder, a rough  
growth to advance—  
goose-grass, or "cleavers", and bristling burrs—while wild oats  
and dreaded darnel ruled head and shoulder over your  
well-tended plot.

So, unless you're set to spend the whole day tackling weeds  
with your hoe, and making noise to scare off birds, and slashing  
back with hooks  
the branches darkening the lands, and all your prayers for rain  
are answered,  
alas, my friend, heaps of grain next door will stare you in the face

and you'll be raiding oaks for acorns to ease the ache of hunger.

Now let me tell about the tools and tackle unflagging farmers  
had to have  
in their arsenal, for none has sowed or saved a crop without them.  
The plowshare first, and the curved plow's solid board,  
and Ceres' hefty carts for sheaves,  
threshing rakes and sledges, and the heavy-weighted mattock.  
And then the lighter implements of wickerwork—arbutus gates  
and hurdles,  
and Iacchus' marvellous riddle which serves to sort the chaff  
from grain.  
So think ahead—stockpile a cache of these in time  
if you're to earn the satisfactions of that heavenly estate.

To make the plow's main curve, fashion by force  
a pliant elm while it's still growing in the ground.  
Then to its stock fit and fasten an eight-foot pole,  
earth-timbers, and a twin-backed beam.  
Light lime you will have kept aside to make the yoke,  
and for the tiller a length of beech to steer it from behind.  
Hung in the hearth, smoke will season wood components.

I could, if I'd not seen you back away from such concerns,  
regale you with a store of ancient learning.  
To begin: grade the threshing floor with the heavy roller,  
taking pains to tamp it tight with chalk  
so that no growth breaks through and it holds firm and  
doesn't crumble.  
Let no blights of pests or parasites squat there  
for often, underground, the mouse sets up his house and home  
and the groping mole excavates a bolt-hole  
and you come upon a shrew or field mouse in a hollow  
and other creatures earth turns out—the beetle scurries  
to spoil heaps of wheat, the emmet hurries to safeguard against  
a want some rainy day.





hard frosts and ice and gloomy spills.  
Between this and the middle sphere a pair of zones is given  
by godly grace to pitiful man, through both of which  
a way's laid down  
and the series of signs takes turns along their roundabout way.  
And the universe, just as it rises to the lofty slopes  
of the Riphæan ranges,  
pitches downward in the south, in Africa.  
There's a pole that always looms above us, while its counterpart  
lies underfoot in Stygian dark and the infernal shades.  
Here the sky's enormous serpent slithers in and out,  
the image of a river, between the Big and Little Dipper,  
those constellations that disdain to be touched or tainted  
by Atlantic's waters.

There, or so they say, either it's the dead of night  
and so still—a black shadow stretching over everything  
as if forever—  
or dawn comes back to them on its way back from us,  
daylight's chaperon,  
and, when morning first inspires us with its puffing horses,  
there the lamps of evening are coming on, and glow.

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Night's the best for cutting lighter crops, night's best  
for well-drained meadows,  
for then there is no lack of lingering moisture.

There's a certain sort of man who by winter firelight  
stays up all night edging iron implements.  
And all the while, with soothing songs lightening the load of  
her routine,  
his helpmeet runs across her loom her rattling reed,  
and in the hearth a flame reduces the sweet-scented must,  
its bubbles simmering in a pot she skims with brushstrokes  
of broad leaves.

While, on the other hand, in midday's highest heat,  
you're better off  
knocking red or ruddy grain or bruising parched produce  
on the threshing floor.

Plow on days you'd strip to the waist; sow the same.  
Winter's the time for farmers to unwind. In colder months  
countrymen enjoy themselves, taking turns to entertain.  
Congenial winter is a treat: it banishes their woes and worries,  
as if a laden ship just docked in a safe haven  
and sailors had begun to decorate its stern with garlands.  
Still and all, that season has its labours, they file away the hours—  
the gather-up of acorns, bayberries and olive-berries,  
and the purple berries of the myrtle.

What's more, it's time for you to set out traps for herons,  
cast nets for stags,  
to course the long-lugged hare and fell a hind  
by hurling your coarse hempen slings the way they do  
in the Balearics—  
all this while snow falls from the heavens, and floods advance  
their loads of ice.

What can I tell about the storms of autumn and its signs,  
or, even, when the days are closing down and summer  
sun's abating,  
what then must men beware of? Or, say, when spring  
comes tumbling

down in showers and crops of corn are tall already,  
their green stalks standing proud with sap?  
How often I have seen, just as the farmer's driven in to reap  
the flaxen field and top the fragile barley crop,  
the clash of squalls and gales in battle mode  
as they ripped up from roots the swathes of ripe and ready corn  
and held them up, the way malefic whirlwinds  
toss beardless stalks around the place, hither and yon.

At other times a rush of water cascades from the sky,  
clouds spill their mass into the foul darkness of a deluge,  
as the heavens open and the rainfall wipes the smiles  
off the faces of the crop the oxen worked so hard  
to make. Ditches fill to the brim, rampant channels overflow,  
the sea rages up each boiling inlet.

Then Jupiter, squire of the sky, straddling the night clouds,  
dispatches  
from his gleaming hand a thunderbolt and makes  
the whole world quake.

Wild beasts take off, and everywhere human hearts  
are laid low in a panic. He hurls that blazing dart  
onto Athos, Rhodope and the peaks of Ceraunia;  
south winds redouble and rains intensify;  
now the great groves in the gale, and now the shores,  
burst into tears.

So, in apprehension, keep an eye on each month's constellations,  
and note where the cold star of Saturn steals away to,  
and in which orbits the planet Mercury is wandering.  
Above all else, venerate the gods and pay your annual offerings  
to Ceres, when the grass is in good heart,  
at the very end of winter when spring brings on clear skies.  
Then lambs are fit, wine's at its best.  
Sleep's pure delight, and on the heights deep shadows lie.  
Have all your workers be worshippers of that goddess,  
and offer milk and honey and mild wine,  
and march a victim three times around fresh crops for luck

while all the others celebrate, a band of allies in support.  
Let them implore her loudly to come and rest with them,  
but stay the hand of any one who'd lay a sickle

to a single ear of corn

who has not wreathed his head with oak leaves in her honour  
and made up dances and sung hymns to her.

And so that we might be prepared to read unerring clues—  
anticipate heatwaves and showers and winds precipitating cold—  
he himself, the Father, decreed what each moon phase  
would mean, the sign by which south winds subside,  
what always indicates that farmers keep their teams in stalls  
and near to hand. The minute winds begin to swell  
and seas to surge in rage, a crackling crash  
sounds loud up in the mountains, chaotic noises echo  
far along the coast and murmurs in woodlands increase.  
Then the waves are in no mood to bear a ship  
and cormorants dash back from sea and bring their screeches  
to the shore, water-hens more used to waterways  
play on dry land—a sign for herons to forsake  
the marshes and weave their way high in the sky.  
And you can readily predict impending gales  
by shooting stars that blaze their way through the night sky  
and leave a white trail printed there.  
You'll see airy chaff and fallen leaves afloat on waves,  
down and feathers fluttering there.

But then, when from the quarters of the north wind  
lightning flashes  
and from the home place of the east- and west-winds  
thunder rumbles,  
the countryside's awash with the overwhelm of ditches  
and seafarers furl their soaking sails.

A spill of rain should never catch you unawares,  
for either you'll have seen soaring cranes seek protection  
in the bottoms,

a heifer face the sky suspiciously and work its nose to sniff the wind,  
sweet-singing swallows circle round a lake,  
and heard the frogs stuck in the mud and croaking  
their old grumpy sounds.

More often you'll see ants transporting eggs along  
a narrow, well-worn way  
from their safest shelter, or a mighty rainbow bending down  
to take a drink, or as they evacuate their feeding grounds  
a cavalcade of squawky rooks.

Next, a host of seabirds and those contented rummaging  
in grassland swamps of Asia Minor or pools along the river Cayster  
mimic each other by splashing spray onto their upper bodies,  
now plunging headfirst into waves, now spurting underwater,  
so that you'd think they're revelling in the ordinary  
routines of washing.

Then a crow, strutting the deserted shore,  
proclaims in its mean caw, Rain, rain, and then more rain.

In truth, even in the dark of night, young women busy  
carding wool,  
can foretell a storm's approach: they notice in their lighted lamps  
a sputtering, and watch spent wicks begin to clot and harden.  
And it's as easy to predict sunny days and stretches  
of clear weather  
in the wake of heavy showers if you're attentive to the signs.  
For the points of stars won't then appear blunted  
nor the moon's own beams rise up as though it borrowed  
light from its brother moon  
nor clouds like wispy fleeces be borne across the heavens.  
Along the strand, kingfishers—favourites of  
the sea-nymph, Thetis—  
won't extend their wings in the warm sun  
nor filthy lazing swine think of tossing with their snouts  
the bedding in their sties.  
Instead, the clouds determine to hang heavy on the lowlands,  
while, at sunfall, night's silent raptor watches from above  
and wastes its time hooting charms and hexes.

High in the skies Nisus comes into view, a sparrow-hawk,  
and Scylla pays the price for that lock of reddish hair she stole.  
Whenever she goes flying by, splitting the heavens,  
there he'll be, her father and her mortal foe, spitting screeches  
and in hot pursuit; yes, where Nisus takes himself up and away  
there she'll ever be, slicing heaven with her wings  
and cutting it to pieces.

Then ravens strain their voices to pour forth their one pure note,  
three times or four,  
and, perched high on their roosts, croak from their green shade  
in ways that we don't understand but with better  
than their customary cheer.  
How it seems to lift their hearts, when a rain belt's passed overhead,  
to turn back to their new-hatched brood  
and their beloved nestlings.

Not that I accept, however hard I try, that they've  
the slightest talent given them by god  
nor that fate bestowed on them any shred of ancient lore.

And yet—where there are changes in the weather  
and shifts in atmosphere—  
Jupiter, the god of sky, with sodden southern winds condenses  
all that had been airy and rarefies what had been so oppressive.  
Then they have a change of heart and give themselves  
to different feelings,  
different from those when gusts were shaking up the clouds—  
and that's the cause, across the country, of concord among birds,  
of livestock lying down in peace and ravens crying out  
their hallelujahs.

It's true—you keep your eye on the fleet-footed sun  
and any run of moons, and dawn won't take you by surprise,  
nor tricks of cloudless night catch you off guard.  
For when the moon collects herself in brimming fires,  
if she is cradling an amorphous shape and sheen,  
you have "earthshine"  
and spills of rain are on the way to those who hoe  
the fields and row the waves.

But if she blushes like a maiden there'll be a breeze;  
the advent of the wind precipitates a flush on the fresh face of  
the moon.

But if, on her fourth morning (that most reliable of all),  
she sallies through an open sky, her horns unblurred,  
all that day long, and all the days that stem from it  
until month's end, you needn't waste a fret on wind or rain  
and sailors standing safe ashore may count their blessings  
and give thanks to those sea-deities, Glaucus, Panope,  
and Ino's son, Melicertes.

And the sun itself, on its way up or sliding down  
below the waves, offers signs—  
none more deserving of our heed than those attached to it as it rises  
in the morning or as it meets the winking stars. If he appears  
at dawn  
all stained with spots or hides in clouds the middle of his face  
watch out for heavy showers: there'll be a south wind  
pounding from on high  
that is no friend to trees or crops or cattle.  
But if he comes pushing through thick clouds in all directions  
like bright spokes of a section of a wheel  
or if the goddess of the dawn rises wanly  
from her consort's saffron couch  
beware, alas, there's nothing you can do for them, your ripe  
shoots of vines,  
such heavy hail will bounce and clatter on your roof.  
This, too, when he's passed through and is retiring to the heavens,  
you'll do well to remember, for often we'll observe odd colours  
stray across his countenance—dark blues declare  
that there'll be rains, while tints of fire forecast hasty winds.  
But if those hues begin to blend with glowing red  
look out for gales and stormy clouds together.  
On such a night, spare me the thought  
that anyone would contemplate  
that he'd set sail or as much as touch the tie rope of his boat.  
But if, when he presents the day and then retracts it,  
his face is just as clear both times, your storm fears

are a thing of nothing, and you'll see trees tilting  
gently in a northerly.

In short, whatever evening's bringing on, whence winds propel  
fair-weather clouds, and what wet southerlies portend,  
the sun will advance warning signs. Who'd dare to question  
the sun's word? For it is he, once more, who forstalls troubles,  
hidden but at hand, of conflicts festering out of sight.  
And it was he who felt for Rome that time that Cæsar fell  
and veiled his gleaming head in gloom  
so dark the infidels began to fear that night would last forever.  
Although, in that catastrophe, the earth itself and stretches  
of the sea,

unruly hounds, and bad-natured birds,  
sounded their predictions too.  
How frequently we've watched eruptions of Mount Etna  
and the expulsions from her furnaces spill on the  
one-eyed giants' lands  
fireballs and molten lava.

The skies of Germany resounded with the din of war,  
weird stirrings caused the Alps to tremble.  
What's more, in quiet groves a voice was heard by many peoples,  
a monstrous voice, and pallid spectres loomed  
through the dead of night and—dare I say it?—  
cattle spoke. The rivers ground to a halt, gaping holes appeared,  
and in the sanctuary carved ivories began to weep  
the tears of mourning  
and bronzes to perspire. The Po, king river, swept away  
in raging rushes

across the open plains whole plantations, cattle and their stalls,  
swept all away. That was a time  
when entrails, carefully scrutinised, showed nothing but the worst  
and wellsprings spouted blood all day  
and hilltowns howled all night with wolves.  
And never was a time more streaks of lightning split a limpid sky—  
nor one when dismal comets flared at such close intervals.  
So was it any wonder that Phillippi observed for the second time  
the clash of Roman forces in a civil war,



and gods above did not think it a shame that we,  
with our own blood,  
would once again enrich an expanse of Emathia  
and the plains below Hæmus.  
Nothing surer than the time will come when, in those fields,  
a farmer plowing will unearth  
rough and rusted javelins and hear his heavy hoe  
echo on the sides of empty helmets and stare  
in open-eyed amazement  
at the bones of heroes he's just happened on.

O Romulus, god of our fathers, strength of our homes,  
our mother Vesta,  
who watches over our Etruscan Tiber and the palaces of Rome,  
stand back, don't block the way of this young one  
who comes to save  
a world in ruins. More than enough and long ago we paid in blood  
for the lies Laomedon told at Troy. Long, long ago  
since heaven's royal estate  
begrudded you first your place among us, Cæsar,  
grumbling of your empathies with the cares of men  
and the victories they earn.  
For right and wrong are mixed up here, there's so much  
warring everywhere,  
evil has so many faces, and there's no regard for the efforts  
of the plow. Bereft of farmers, fields have run to a riot of weeds.  
Scythes and sickles have been hammered into weapons of war.  
Look here, the east is up in arms; look there, hostilities in Germany.  
Neighbouring cities renege on what they pledged  
and launch attacks—  
the whole world's at loggerheads, a blasphemous battle,  
as when, right from the ready, steady, go, chariots quicken  
on a track  
until the driver hasn't a hope of holding the reins  
and he is carried away  
by a team that pays heed to nothing, wildly away and no control.

*(translated by Peter Fallon)*