

Winter 2006

from The Georgics translated by Kimberly Johnson

Publius Virgilius Maro

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Virgil

from The Georgics

1.1-42: Invocation and the first labors of spring

What cheers the grain, beneath what star to turn
the soil, Maecenas, when to wed vines
to the elms, what care the cows, what care
the flocks require, what skill the thrifty bees,
of these I raise my song. You, o brightest fires
of heaven, that guide the gliding year across the sky,
you, o Liber and generous Ceres, if by your influence earth
changed Chaonian nuts for sumptuous corn
and steeped new grapes in drafts of Achelous;
and you, the bumpkin's practical gods, you Fauns 10
(lift steps together, Fauns and wood-maids!)
your bounties I sing. O Neptune, you—for whom the ground
hammered by your mighty trident first cast forth
the champing horse; and the genius of the groves,
whose three hundred snowy bullocks browse
the lush thickets of Cea; and you yourself, Tegean Pan,
careful shepherd, forsaking your native glades
and woods of Lycaeus and your loved Maenalus—
kindly come. Come Minerva, who contrived the olive,
come swain who swung the curving plow,
Silvanus with your uprooted cypress sapling, all gods 20
and goddesses who keep watch over fields—
you who coax young fruits unsown, who pour
from heaven lavish rain. And chiefly you,
o Caesar, whom unknown assemblies of gods may claim
in time, whether you choose to inspect cities
and succor lands while all the world declares you
author of increase and master of skies, and wreathes
your brows with your bright mother's myrtles,
or whether you appear a god of the unfathomable sea
as sailors reverence your glory alone and farthest Thule 30

serves you, and Tethys with all her waves
bids for your seed, or whether you bestow yourself
a new star to the languid months
where between the Virgin and the claws that chase her
a space is opening (already the ardent Scorpion
contracts his arms to yield you greater share of heaven)...
whatever you will be (but Tartarus hopes not for you
as its king—and never may such cruel lust for dominion
come upon you, though Greece reveres Elysian fields
and Persephone reclaimed complains to surface with her mother),
make smooth my course, approve my bold endeavor, 40
and, pitying with me peasants unknowing of the way,
step up and learn even now to honor prayers.

1.287-310: Night work

Many tasks lend themselves better to cool night,
or when at dawn the morning star dewes the earth.
At night fine stubble, at night dry meadows are best mown,
at night the retting damp is never lacking. 290
One man before the late flame of a winter lamp
lingers wakeful, and with his axe's edge tapers torchpoles
while, consoling her long toil with song,
his wife with shrill shuttle zips across the warp
or at the hearth reduces the grape's sweet juices,
skimming off the pot's rolling current with a frond.
But auburn grain is reaped in heat of noon,
in heat of noon the threshing floor flails the husks:
strip to plow, strip to sow. Winter is the farmer's breather.
In cold snaps farmers revel in their yield 300
and treat themselves to mutual banqueting with pleasure.
Winter's gaity stirs them, melts their cares,
as when at last the laden keels make port
and giddy sailors drape the decks in garlands.
Still, now's time to pluck acorns and bayberries,
olives and the fruit of the blood-red myrtle,
time to lay snares for cranes and nets for deer,
to track the long-eared hare, time to knock down the doe,
to whirl the hempen thongs of your Balearic sling,
when snow lies deep, when rivers shove through ice. 310

2.458-474

O blessed farmers! doubly blessed if they should recognize
their blessings! For whom far from clashing arms
the just earth pours from her soil easy provision. 460
What if no mansion, lofty with lordly doors, disgorge
each dawn from all quarters a grand tide of callers?
What if they never gawk at doorposts freaked with tortoiseshell
resplendent, or raiment tricked with gold, or Corinthian bronzes?
What if their white wool's never stained with Assyrian potions,
their pure oil not defiled with cinnamon?
Still there's a carefree peace, and life unversed in guile,
a wealth of varied plenty, still the leisure of broad estates—
caves and natural lakes and Tempes cool,
lowing cows and soft sleep beneath the trees 470
are never wanting. There pastured glens and game-runs,
there is youth accustomed to industry and seasoned by dearth,
there devotion to gods and filial piety: among these
departing Justice left her last footprints upon the earth.

Translated from the Latin by Kimberly Johnson