

Farewells and Falling Leaves

Iliad Book 6 by Homer

Diomedes, expert in war cries, was the first to speak:

“Who are you, my dear man, among mortal men?

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For I’ve never clapped eyes on you before
in those fights where men win glory.
But now you’ve stepped out well beyond the ranks,
showing more courage here than anyone,
standing up to my long-shadowed spear.
Men who face me end up with grieving parents.
If you’re one of the immortal gods
come down from heaven, I won’t fight you.
Even mighty Lycurgus, son of Dryas,

[130]

did not live long, once he started battling

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heavenly gods. He was the one who chased
attendants of the frenzied Dionysus,
forcing them to run by sacred Nysa.
They all threw their holy wands onto the ground,
as murderous Lycurgus with his ox whip
kept beating them. Even Dionysus,
terrified, jumped in the ocean waves.
Thetis embraced him, as he shook with fear,
intimidated by Lycurgus’ threats.
He angered the gods, who live without a care,

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so the son of Cronos blinded him.
He didn’t live much longer, not once he’d made
all the deathless gods displeased with him.

[140]

So I don’t want to battle sacred gods.
But if you’re a mortal man, someone
who eats earth’s fruit, come closer to me,
so you can meet your death more quickly.”

Glauco, fine son of Hippolochus, replied:

“Son of Tydeus, great-hearted Diomedes,
why ask me about my ancestry?

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Generations of men are like the leaves.

In winter, winds blow them down to earth,
but then, when spring season comes again,
the budding wood grows more. And so with men—
one generation grows, another dies away.

Ecclesiastes

1:1 The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem:

1:2 “Vanity of vanities,” says the Preacher; “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.” 1:3 What does man gain from all his labor in which he labors under the sun? 1:4 One generation goes, and another generation comes; but the earth remains forever. 1:5 The sun also rises, and the sun goes down, and hurries to its place where it rises. 1:6 The wind goes toward the south, and turns around to the north. It turns around continually as it goes, and the wind returns again to its courses. 1:7 All the rivers run into the sea, yet the sea is not full. To the place where the rivers flow, there they flow again. 1:8 All things are full of weariness beyond uttering. The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing. 1:9 That which has been is that which shall be; and that which has been done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun. 1:10 Is there a thing of which it may be said, “Behold, this is new?” It has been long ago, in the ages which were before us. 1:11 There is no memory of the former; neither shall there be any memory of the latter that are to come, among those that shall come after.

Aeneid Book 6 by Virgil

There Charon stands, who rules the dreary coast—
A sordid god: down from his hoary chin
A length of beard descends, uncomb'd, unclean;
His eyes, like hollow furnaces on fire;
A girdle, foul with grease, binds his obscene attire.
He spreads his canvas; with his pole he steers;
The freights of flitting ghosts in his thin bottom bears.
He look'd in years; yet in his years were seen
A youthful vigor and autumnal green.
An airy crowd came rushing where he stood,
Which fill'd the margin of the fatal flood:
Husbands and wives, boys and unmarried maids,
And mighty heroes' more majestic shades,
And youths, intomb'd before their fathers' eyes,
With hollow groans, and shrieks, and feeble cries.
Thick as the leaves in autumn strow the woods,

Or fowls, by winter forc'd, forsake the floods,
And wing their hasty flight to happier lands;
Such, and so thick, the shiv'ring army stands,
And press for passage with extended hands.
Now these, now those, the surly boatman bore:
The rest he drove to distance from the shore.

Inferno [Hell]

Canto III

“Charon! thyself torment not: so ’tis will’d,
Where will and power are one: ask thou no more.” 90
 Straightway in silence fell the shaggy cheeks
Of him, the boatman o’er the livid lake,
Around whose eyes glared wheeling flames. Meanwhile
Those spirits, faint and naked, color changed,
And gnash’d their teeth, soon as the cruel words 95
They heard. God and their parents they blasphemed,
The human kind, the place, the time, and seed,
That did engender them and give them birth,
 Then all together sorely wailing drew
To the curst strand, that every man must pass 100
Who fears not God. Charon, demoniac form,
With eyes of burning coal, collects them all,
Beckoning, and each, that lingers, with his oar
Strikes. As fall off the light autumnal leaves
One still another following, till the bough 105
Strews all its honours on the earth beneath;
E’en in like manner Adam’s evil brood
Cast themselves, one by one, down from the shore,
Each at a beck, as falcon at his call. 3
 Thus go they over through the umber’d wave; 110
And ever they on the opposing bank
Be landed, on this side another throng
Still gathers. “Son,” thus spake the courteous guide,
“Those who die subject to the wrath of God
All here together come from every clime 115
And to o’erpass the river are not loth:
For so Heaven’s justice goads them on, that fear
Is turn’d into desire. Hence ne’er hath past
Good spirit. If of thee Charon complain,
Now mayst thou know the import of his words.” 120
 This said, the gloomy region trembling shook

So terribly, that yet with clammy dews
Fear chills my brow. The sad earth gave a blast,
That, lightening, shot forth a vermilion flame,
Which all my senses conquer'd quite, and I
Down dropp'd, as one with sudden slumber seized.

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Paradise Lost from Book I by John Milton

He scarce had ceas't when the superiour Fiend
Was moving toward the shoar; his ponderous shield
Ethereal temper, massy, large and round, [285]
Behind him cast; the broad circumference
Hung on his shoulders like the Moon, whose Orb
Through Optic Glass the Tuscan Artist views
At Ev'ning from the top of Fesole.
Or in Valdarno, to descry new Lands, [290]
Rivers or Mountains in her spotty Globe.
His Spear, to equal which the tallest Pine
Hewn on Norwegian hills, to be the Mast
Of some great Ammiral, were but a wand,
He walkt with to support uneasie steps [295]
Over the burning Marle, not like those steps
On Heavens Azure, and the torrid Clime
Smote on him sore besides, vaulted with Fire;
Nathless he so endur'd, till on the Beach
Of that inflamed Sea, he stood and call'd [300]
His Legions, Angel Forms, who lay intrans't
Thick as Autumnal Leaves that strow the Brooks
In Vallombrosa, where th' Etrurian shades
High overarch't imbowr; or scatterd sedge
Afloat, when with fierce Winds Orion arm'd [305]
Hath vext the Red-Sea Coast, whose waves orethrew
Busiris and his Memphian Chivalry,
While with perfidious hatred they pursu'd
The Sojourners of Goshen, who beheld
From the safe shore thir floating Carkases [310]
And broken Chariot Wheels, so thick bestrown
Abject and lost lay these, covering the Flood,
Under amazement of thir hideous change.
He call'd so loud, that all the hollow Deep
Of Hell resounded. Princes, Potentates, [315]
Warriers, the Flowr of Heav'n, once yours, now lost,

Ode to the West Wind by Shelley

IV

43If I were a dead leaf thou mightest bear;
44If I were a swift cloud to fly with thee;
45A wave to pant beneath thy power, and share

46The impulse of thy strength, only less free
47Than thou, O uncontrollable! If even
48I were as in my boyhood, and could be

49The comrade of thy wanderings over Heaven,
50As then, when to outstrip thy skiey speed
51Scarce seem'd a vision; I would ne'er have striven

52As thus with thee in prayer in my sore need.
53Oh, lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud!
54I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!

55A heavy weight of hours has chain'd and bow'd
56One too like thee: tameless, and swift, and proud.

V

57Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is:
58What if my leaves are falling like its own!
59The tumult of thy mighty harmonies

60Will take from both a deep, autumnal tone,
61Sweet though in sadness. Be thou, Spirit fierce,
62My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!

63Drive my dead thoughts over the universe
64Like wither'd leaves to quicken a new birth!
65And, by the incantation of this verse,

66Scatter, as from an unextinguish'd hearth
67Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!
68Be through my lips to unawaken'd earth

69The trumpet of a prophecy! O Wind,
70If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?

106. In a Station of the Metro by Ezra Pound

THE apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough.

For Robert Frost, in the Autumn, in Vermont

All on the mountains, as on tapestries
Reversed, their thread unreadable though clear,
The leaves turn in the volume of the year.
Your land becomes more brilliant as it dies.

The puzzled pilgrims come, car after car,
With Cameras loaded for epiphanies;
For views of failure to take home and prize,
The dying tourists ride through realms of fire.

“To die is gain,” a virgin’s tombstone said;
That was New England, too, another age
That put a higher price on maidenhead
if brought in dead; now on your turning page
The lines blaze with a constant light, displayed
As in the maples cold and fiery shade.

Beautiful Woman

A.R. Ammons

The spring
in

her step
has

turned to
fall