

HORACE

THE ODES

New Translations by Contemporary Poets

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I.2

It's enough now, all this vicious snow and hail
Father Jupiter has sent to earth, enough
his striking sacred peaks with a smoldering hand
to terrify the town,

to terrify the people: what if the dismal age
of Pyrrha should return, when she quailed at strange
new signs, when Proteus drove his ocean herd
to visit mountaintops,

and the race of fish clustered in the highest elms
where doves used to build their nests in the dry old days,
and deer swam, terrified, in floods ravaging
over the lost land?

We saw the mustard Tiber, his waves flung back
passionately from the Tuscan shore, roar up
to batter King Numa's monuments, and swamp
the vestal shrines—

the river god too loving, too wildly avenging
his Ilia's grief, he threw himself so far
wandering over the strict left bank where Jove
never permitted.

They'll hear of it, our children, few as they are
because of their parents' sins, they'll hear of war
and citizens sharpening swords against citizens,
not against Parthians.

What god can the people call as the Empire totters,
what prayer shall the virgin priestesses use to implore
Vesta, who leans away from their chants, and listens
less and less?

What god will Jupiter choose to purify
our crimes? After so long, come down, Apollo,
prophetic god, we pray, your brilliant shoulders
cloaked in cloud;

or should it be you, Venus of subtle laughter,
Joy and Arousal fluttering at your side;
or Mars, our ancestor, if you look on
your neglected children,

you, gorged on this endless game of war, still thrilled
at battle clang and glare of helmets, the grim
face of the Moorish foot-soldier head to head
with his enemy bleeding.

Or could it be you, sweet Maia's wing-footed child,
changed in your shape to act the part on earth
of a mortal young man, letting yourself be called
Caesar's avenger:

don't hurry back to the heavens, be happy here
long years among Quirinus' people; don't
let some quick breeze snatch you away from us
in your scorn of our vices;

here, on earth, may you love great victories,
here may you love us to call you Father and Princeps,
and don't let the Medes go on scot-free, raiding,
while you lead us, Caesar.

Rosanna Warren

He planted you on a malignant day, whoever
first tamped your roots down, tree; with a cursed hand
he raised you to blight the future
and shame the countryside.

He throttled his own father, I'd believe,
and spattered his fireplace with a guest's blood at night;
he deals in Colchian poisons
and any crime cooked up

in the mind of man, the one who established you
in my field, rotten, corrupted tree, to fall
all of a sudden on the head
of your innocent master.

From one hour to the next, man never knows
how to sidestep danger: the Punic sailor
shudders at the Bosphorus but hardly
thinks of the threats beyond;

the soldier dreads the Parthian's arrows and swift
retreat, the Parthian fears Italy's chains and force;
but fate, in violence, by surprise, has seized,
and will seize, every people on earth.

I came within a breath of seeing dark Proserpina's realm
and Aeacus sitting in judgment, and the halls
set aside for the just; I almost saw
Sappho with her Aeolian lyre

sobbing for the girls of Lesbos; and you, Alcaeus, playing
more fully as you pluck the strings with your golden pick,
of sorrows at sea, sorrows endured
in exile, sorrows of war.

The shades listen, marveling, as both
sing words compelling a sacred hush; but most,
packed shoulder to shoulder, the crowd drinks in
stories of war, of banished tyrants.

No wonder the hundred-headed monster, drugged
by such songs, droops his black ears, and the snakes
twined in the Furies' hair
pause in their writhing.

Even Prometheus and Tantalus are seduced
from their torments by the honeyed sound,
and Orion leaves off chasing
lions and cautious lynxes.

Rosanna Warren

III.7

Why are you crying, Asteria, for Gyges
when the bright west winds will bring him home in spring
flush from deals in Bithynia
and always faithful to you?

Under the crazed Goat Star, the south wind drove him
to Oricum, where he shivers through the nights,
insomniac, cold, dampening
his pillow with tears.

But that sly servant girl sidles up and murmurs
how Chloë, his love-dazed hostess, pines for him,
and burns with your very fires—
in a thousand ways, the girl tempts him.

She tells how his treacherous wife pushed Proetus,
who fell for her lying stories and accusations,
to plot revenge upon
too-chaste Bellerophon;

she tells how Peleus almost plunged to the Underworld
for keeping his hands off Magnesian Hippolyte;
and with every breath, the vixen
instructs him how to sin.

Don't worry: your Gyges, deafer than the Icarian cliff,
hears all this and, so far, stands firm. But you,
my dear, watch that your neighbor Enipeus
doesn't charm you more than he should;

though he's the most dashing rider on the Field of Mars,
the most elegant horseman, and no one swims so well
the Tiber's powerful current
in the public view.

As soon as night falls, bolt your shutters and doors, and don't
peek out in the street at the tune of his pleading flute;
hold firm, no matter how
often he calls you cruel.

Rosanna Warren

IV.7

All gone, the snow: grass throngs back to the fields,
the trees grow out new hair;
earth follows her changes, and subsiding streams
jostle within their banks.

The three graces and the greenwood nymphs,
naked, dare to dance.
You won't live always, warn the year and the hour,
seizing the honeyed day.

Cold softens in breezes, spring fades into summer's heat
no sooner felt than doomed
when autumn pours out its harvest fruits, and soon
ice-solid winter steps back.

Swift-changing moons repair these heavenly hurts.
But we, when we go down
where pious Aeneas, rich Tullus, and Ancus have gone,
we're nothing but dust and shade.

Who knows how many tomorrows the gods will add
to today's small sum?
Whatever you spend in pleasures now, you won't
leave in your heir's moist grip.

Once you've died, and Minos has passed his mighty
sentence on you, Torquatus,
not family name, nor virtue, nor ingenious speeches will ever
spirit you back to life.

Not even Diana frees chaste Hippolytus
from the Underworld dark;
and Theseus hasn't the strength to loosen death's chains
from Pirithous, whom he loved.

Rosanna Warren