

FIVE FROM THE ROMAN POETS

translated by Paul Magee

1. Virgil *Aeneid* 2.77-104

I will tell you the whole truth, Trojan King, whatever may become of it, he said, and I won't deny my Peloponnesian roots. That's the first point. For even if Fate has left Sinon a broken man, she shall *not*, in all her cruelty, make me practise deceit. Perhaps some word got into your ears of Palamedes he was Belus' son, Palamedes, he was famous to the stars. With a false charge of treason, a snake's allegation, and only because he'd once opposed their war, the Greeks struck him down for death; but now they mourn his absence from this light. He was the man to whom my impoverished father sent me from my earliest years, to act as his companion-in-arms against you to come fight here. While reigning safely, he stood tall in committees of the kings—as did I—earning their respect and our power. But when Palamedes was struck by the envy of that two-face (believe me, I know) Ulysses, and sank down from the world above I drowned my days out, in broken spirits, in shadows, in grief at the destruction of my innocent friend, but raging inside. And mad as I was I could not hold it in; I swore that if I ever returned to our Achaean homeland, at the first opportunity, and in the midst of our victory, I would avenge him; and so I targeted their hatred upon me. From that moment, I date the beginning of my fall; Ulysses now began to terrify me with accusations of the unspeakable. He started to spread his lying tongues about me in the crowd, laid traps for me, sewed teeth against me, plotted with skill relentlessly and then, with Calchas the priest in his pay— But why am I telling you this wretched and pointless tale? Why stop time? If you think that Greeks are all the same the sound of Sinon's name alone will suffice; execute him right now. That's what Ulysses would want, the Greek leaders would even pay to see me gone.

2. Ovid *Metamorphoses* 8.231-259

And the cursed father, no longer a father, said 'Icarus!
Icarus,' he said, 'where are you? Where am I to find you?'

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Icarus!' he kept saying, till eyeing the boy's wings in the waves.
Deploring his own creations, the father buried his son's body
in a mound on Icaria—that's how the island got its name. And while
Daedalus was placing the bones of his poor boy in the grave,
a chattering partridge looked on from a muddy ditch,
applauded with his wings, and in song testified
to his joy. Only recently transformed, he was the sole
bird of his race still, his fate an everlasting reproach
to you, o inventor. For Daedalus' sister, unaware
of how Fate would call, had apprenticed her son to him:
Partridge, a boy of twelve years, his mind open to learning. Already
he had cut rows of teeth in sharp steel, taking for his model
the backbone of a fish. Thus he discovered the saw. He had
bound with one knot two steel legs; one would stand fast
while the other, at a constant distance, would draw in
a circle. Daedalus, jealous of his nephew, threw him
from the holy citadel of Athens. 'Partridge fell,' he lied.
But the boy, whom Athena adored for his mind,
was caught by the goddess and returned as a bird,
feathers formed in mid-air, the force of his mind,
already birdlike, slipped into feet and wings, his name
alone remained. Not quite. For the partridge, despite his wings,
does not trust himself to heights, nor lodge his nests
on the tips of tall branches. Near the ground he flies,
lays eggs in hedges and, ever a memory of his ancient fall,
fears heights.

3. Virgil *Aeneid* 2.250-253

Then the sky turned on its point, and night fell upon Ocean,
covering Heaven, Earth and all the deceit of the Greeks
in its huge shadow. The Trojans, splayed out along the high
walls of the city, fell silent. Sleep embraced their weary limbs
in its arms, and I looked up the word for *patefactus*

4. Catullus 93

I don't particularly
give a fuck about you Caesar.
I've no wish to please you.
I don't even care if
you're black or white.

5. Virgil *Georgics* 4.1-17

Now I shall describe the gifts of air-born heavenly honey.
Attend to this portion too of my poem, Maecenas.
I shall sing of vistas to amaze you in the world
of little things, their great-minded leaders, their customs
and callings, their nations and battles, all in order;
my work treats of a slight theme, but the glory will be great
if the adverse powers allow it, if Apollo hear my prayer.
First one must find a place, a home for the bees
free of the wind's advances—for the wind forbids
food to be brought home. Do not allow sheep, or
little head-butting goats to trample down the flowers,
keep baby cows, wandering in the plains, from shaking
the dew free, or wearing away the grasses as they grow.
Keep the painted lizards with their stiffening spines
far from the rich houses, along with the bee-eaters
and the other birds, Procne the swallow among them
whose breasts bear the marks of her own bloody hands.
For they lay waste to all around. They fly off with bees
in their mouths, as sweet snacks for their merciless young.