

Excerpt From: Lucretius, "The Nature of Things," translation by A.E. Stallings

From the last part of Book VI - Weather and the Earth

"[1090] Now I'll explain the causes of disease: whence does it rise,
So of a sudden a pestilence can kindle the demise
Of humankind and of the legions of beasts. For first, as I've
Taught earlier, there are many seeds of things we need to thrive;
But on the other hand, there are many seeds that swarm around
Engendering sickness and death, and when by chance these seeds abound,
They throw the heavens into turmoil and infect the air.
And all this onslaught of pestilence comes either from somewhere
Beyond the world, as mist or clouds, through the heavens overhead,

[1100] Or it gathers and arises from the earth itself instead,
When the sodden ground is rotten with mud, lashed by the sun's rays
And unseasonable rains. Don't we see how someone who strays
Far from hearth and homeland is afflicted by the strange
Climate and water, because they undergo so great a change?
Just think how different the climate where the Britons dwell
Must be from Egypt's, where the axis pivots – think, as well,
How climes of Black Sea and Cadiz must differ – or way back
Down to where the sunshine bakes the skin of nations black.

[1110] And as we see four different climates in the four directions
Of the four cardinal winds, and as men's features and complexions
Differ widely, ailments also vary by nation. While
Elephantiasis strikes only near the river Nile
In the midst of Egypt, in Attica, instead, problems arise
With the feet, and in Achaea, what's afflicted are the eyes.
Thus different places are hostile to different members of the frame;
The variety of airs in different places is to blame.
So when a sky bestirs itself, one that is alien

[1120] To us – and an unwholesome air starts slowly creeping in –
Slinking in the manner of clouds and mists – wherever it crawls,
It wreaks havoc and alters everything. If it befalls
That such a miasma enters our own climate, it will change
Our sky with its contagion, making it like itself and strange
To us. So of a sudden a new plague or pestilence drops
Down upon the waters, or even settles on the crops
Or other source of food for men or fodder for beasts, or floats

Suspended in the air itself, so that we breathe its motes
Together with the air that we inhale, and take it deep

[1130] Inside our flesh. And in the selfsame way, plagues often sweep
Through herds of cattle; now distemper strikes the dawdling sheep.
Nor does it make a difference whether it is we who range
To another climate, hostile to ourselves, and we exchange
Our mantle of sky, or whether it is, rather, Nature who
Imports a sky contaminated, a climate that is new
To us who, unaccustomed, are more vulnerable to attack.
This is what caused the fatal tide of pestilence years back
In Athens land of Cecrops, that blighted fields, and left no trace

[1140] Of traffic on the roads, and made a ghost-town of the place.
From deep in the heart of Egypt it uprose, and crossed the vast
Expanse of air and swimming plains, until it fell, at last,
Wholesale upon the people of Pandion. Wave after wave,
In legions, they were handed over to sickness and the grave.
The symptom first to strike was fiery fever in the head,
“And both eyes, burning hectic bright, were all shot through with red.
The throat as well would sweat with blood, all black within. And stung
With sores, the pathway of the voice would clog and choke. The tongue,
Interpreter of the mind, oozed pus, and, made limp with the smart,

[1150] Was too heavy to move, and rough. Thence the disease would start,
Passing the gullet, to fill the chest, and flood the heavy heart
Of the afflicted, and then, indeed, all of the gates of Life
Began to give. From the open mouth, there would exhale a rife
Stink, like the stench of rank unburied corpses left to rot.
And then all of the powers of the mind and body, brought
To the very brink of doom, began to flicker. Mental strain
Ever danced attendance on intolerable pain;
Pleas mingled with moans. Ceaseless retching, lasting day

[1160] And night, was ever causing seizure and cramp, and wasting away
The strength of men already racked with suffering and worn out.
And yet if you laid hands upon a sufferer, you did not
Feel that the surface of his body was excessively hot;
Rather, to the touch it felt slightly warm – though you discerned
The skin was red and broken out with blisters as though burned,
Or else as when the Sacred Fire covers all the frame.
Yet on the inside, men were burning to the bone. A flame

Blazed in the stomach as if in an oven. There was no stuff

[1170] That you could lay upon their skin, flimsy or light enough –
Only coolness and air were ever bearable. Some gave
Their feverish limbs to cooling streams, and plunged into the wave
With naked bodies. Many tumbled down into a well
Headlong from a height, mouths gaping open as they fell.
A parching thirst that drenched them through and through and would not stop
Made gushing floods of water seem no better than a drop.
Nor was there any respite from the pain. The bodies lay
Worn out. Even Medicine did not know what to say,

[1180] But mumbled in terror, haunted by those eyes that ever keep
Rolling, ablaze with fever, and are never closed in sleep.
At that point there were many other signs that death was near –
A mind that was deranged with melancholy, mad with fear,
A frowning brow, an angry and ferocious countenance,
The ears a-throb with tintinnabulation; rapid pants
Of shallow breath, or deep and ragged gasps. A stream of bright
Sweat ran trickling down the neck. The phlegm was scant and slight,
Salty, and tinged with a yellow hue, and even the hacking cough
Could scarcely bring it up the throat. The hands never left off

[1190] Their twitching, and the limbs never stopped shaking. By and by,
A chill stole creeping from the toes, and as the end drew nigh,
The nostrils became pinched, the nose as well grew sharp and thin,
The eyes sunk in their sockets, temples hollowed, and the skin
Went cold and hard, the mouth was grimaced in a rigid grin,
The forehead taut and stretched. And not long afterwards, limbs lay
Stiffened in death. Usually at the gleam of the eighth day,
Or by the shining of the ninth, they would draw their last breath.
The odd survivor – for there were some – had not cheated death:

[1200] For him, a wasting away and slow demise still lay in wait.
Either, running sores and black flux from the bowels, or spate
Of corrupted blood poured through the nose, along with a throbbing head –
The patient's might and main ebbing away with what he bled.
And if the haemorrhaging of foul blood did not leave him dead,
The plague proceeded to the limbs and muscles, and progressed
Even to the genitals. Some people were possessed
With such grave terror at the door of Death that with a knife
They managed to castrate themselves, and so hang on to life.

[1210] Many lingered in this world sans hands or feet. Some lost
The light of their eyes. This was the price such dread of dying cost.
Some fell into a deep forgetfulness, and lost all store
Of memories, and did not know their own selves any more.
Though corpses piled on corpses lay in heaps upon the earth
Unburied, yet the tribes of birds and beasts gave them wide berth
And sprang away in order to escape the noisome stink.
Or else they, having tasted of the flesh, at once would sink
Down dead – though there were hardly any birds to speak of, nor

[1220] Did the dismal tribes of wild beasts venture from the forest, for
The animals fell sick in droves and perished. But the clan
Of dogs was hardest hit, the true and steadfast friend of Man:
Strewn on every corner, life wrenched from them by the might
Of the plague, they still did not give up the ghost without a fight!
One unattended funeral raced another to the grave.
There was no common remedy that would be sure to save –
For what had given one the breath of life, so he could sigh,
Thankful to behold the shining regions of the sky,
Proved fatal to another and dispatched him to his doom.

[1230] But in these matters, what was saddest and most cause for gloom
Was that, when someone saw the plague upon him, he would start
Thinking like a man under sentence of death, and would lose heart,
And lay there listlessly, his mind sunk deep in morbid thought,
And dwelling on his death, gave up his spirit on the spot.
At no time did the greedy disease let up. It caught and spread
From one man to another, as though they were so many head
Of fleecy sheep or cattle. This is what piled deaths up thick:
That if a man shirked visiting his own kin fallen sick,

[1240] For his excessive lust for life and dread of death, he'd learn
The fatal price of Negligence, neglected in his turn,
So shortly afterwards he came to meet a shameful end,
No one by his side to aid him; while those who did attend
The ill, on the other hand (their sense of duty left no choice),
Compelled by pleas for pity mingled with Reproach's voice,
Contracted the disease run down by labour without rest
In the sickroom. And that's how death took the noblest and the best.
People struggled to bury legions of their kinfolk, heaping
One funeral on another, and returned wrung-out with weeping,

Whereupon many took to bed from sheer grief. There was such

[1250] Widespread woe that there was none who had not felt the touch

Of pestilence or death or mourning at this point.

By now,

The shepherd, herdsman and the sturdy helmsman of the plough,
All were fading away. Their bodies lay crammed in the back

Of cottages, betrayed to death by pestilence and lack.

Sometimes you'd see the lifeless corpses of the parents piled

Upon their lifeless children, or vice versa, you'd see child

After child upon their perished parents lay their small lives down.

Mostly this disease flowed from the country to the town.

[1260] For the stricken throng of country folk that poured in helter-skelter,

From every quarter, carried it with them, packing every shelter

And public space until the death-toll mounted all the more

By cramped conditions and stifling heat that slew them by the score.

Many writhed on the roads, prostrate with thirst, or they would sink

Beside the fountains, choked from life by their great greed to drink.

And many bodies you would notice scattered in plain view,

Limbs dangling from half-dead trunks, in square and avenue,

Caked in squalor, clothed in rags and only skin and bone,

[1270] About to perish from their body's filthiness alone,

Already as good as buried in their putrid sores and dirt.

Then Death had filled all shrines with congregations of inert

Corpses; all the temples of the Holy Ones were weighed

Down with cadavers, places where the visitors had prayed

In pressing throngs packed in by sacristans. For at this hour

The worship and the awe of gods had lost most of their power –

The present grief was overwhelming. No one any more

Observed the rites of burial they had observed before,

[1280] For the whole populace was thrown in disarray and cowed.

Each mourner buried his dead just as the time and means allowed.

Squalid Poverty and Sudden Disaster would conspire

To drive men on to desperate deeds – so they'd place on a pyre

Constructed by another their own loved-ones, and set fire

To it with wails and lamentation. And often they would shed

Much blood in the struggle rather than desert their dead.