BOOK 1

MATTER AND SPACE

Mother of all the Romans, delight of men and gods, life-giving Venus, who under the gliding constellations fill with teeming life the sea that bears our ships and land that bears our crops—through you each living creature is conceived and issues forth to look upon the sunlight; at your coming, O goddess, the winds and clouds of heaven are put to flight; for you the skillful earth brings forth her sweetest flowers; for you the ocean levels smile; and heaven, now grown calm, pours forth its gentle light. For when the day puts on her lovely dress of spring and the life-bringing West Wind blows with all his force, then first the birds of heaven herald your approach, for it is your power, goddess, that strikes them to the heart. And cattle all run wild and prance through the rich pastures and swim the rapid rivers: they are enthralled by your charm and follow wherever you lead them with a keen desire. And through the seas and mountains and the rushing rivers, the leafy dwellings of the birds, and the verdant meadows, their hearts are all inspired by you with gentle passion, so that they long to reproduce their several species. Since you alone, O goddess, are the Queen of Nature, and since without you, nothing comes into the daylight, nothing happy, nothing beautiful is created, I crave your help in writing these verses, which I am trying to fashion on the Nature of the Universe for Memmius, my good friend, the man whom you have wished always to excel, endowed with every gift. Therefore, goddess, grant a lasting grace to my words, and meanwhile cause the brutal works of war to cease,
to sleep and to be still, or every land and sea.  
For you alone can bless mankind with tranquil peace,  
since it is mighty Mars who is the Lord of War  
and all its brutal works, and he often lies in your lap,  
entirely conquered by the eternal wound of love,  
and looking upward with his shapely neck bent back,  
he feasts his avid eyes upon you, hungry for love;  
his breath is hanging upon your lips as he reclines.  
And you, O goddess, bend over him as he lies there  
upon your holy body, and shed your honeyed words,  
and for your Romans, glorious goddess, seek placid peace.  
For in such troubled times, I cannot do my work  
with quiet mind, nor can the noble Memmius  
at such a time be wanting to the common safety.  

It now remains for you to devote receptive ears  
and a keen mind, removed from cares, to the True Reason,  
lest my gifts, set forth for you with faithful zeal,  
be scornfully cast aside before they are understood.  
For I am about to disclose to you the laws of heaven  
and of the gods: I shall unfold the beginnings of things  
whence Nature creates all things, increases and fosters them,  
and whither this same Nature dissolves and reduces them,  
—which we shall designate by some such names as Matter,  
and Generative Bodies, and the Seeds of Things,  
and likewise call them by the name of First Bodies,  
because from these First Elements all things are made.  

When human life lay on the ground for all to see,  

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1It has been suggested that Lucretius is referring to a group of statues  
depicting Mars and Venus. Cf. the description of the death of Iphigenia  
(84 ff.) which may refer to a painting.  
2Here and elsewhere, the poet refers to the Civil Wars. Cf. iii, 70.  
3There is a gap of six lines. Lucretius is now addressing Memmius. In  
the MS. lines ii, 646-651 were inserted in place of i, 44-49.  
4Lucretius never calls them atoms. This translation will frequently do  
so, however.
Likewise if one is wounded by the shafts of Venus, whether it be a lad with girlish limbs who has hurled them or a woman radiating love from her whole body, he strives towards the source of the blow, and wants to unite and to eject the fluid from one body to another, for dumb desire is the herald of keen delight.

This, then, is our Venus—this is the thing called Love, thence the drops of Venus' honey first come trickling into our hearts, but after them come chilly cares. For if your loved one is absent, still the images are present, and the beloved name sounds sweet in your ears. Better beware of such images, and frighten away love's fodder, and turn your mind in a different direction, and vent the collected seed of love on other objects, and not retain it, all wrapped up in the love of one person, thereby preserving pain for yourself and sickness of heart. The ulcer gains in strength and thrives by being nourished, and day by day the madness swells, the grief grows worse, unless you can confound the first wounds with new ones, by curing them when they are fresh with roving loves, or by turning your thoughts and mind in other directions. Nor does avoiding love mean missing the joys of Venus: nay, rather, it means enjoyment without the consequences.

For certainly the healthy men have purer pleasures than sick ones. Even in the moment of possession, the passion of lovers is tossed about on raging billows; they do not know what first to enjoy with eyes or hands. They press the object of love so closely that it hurts, and kiss each other so fiercely that lips are bruised by teeth, and this is because the pleasure is not unmixed and pure, but there are unconscious goads that make them want to hurt the very object of their passion, whatever it be.

But Venus can also lighten the penalties she gives—the cruel wings are sometimes embued by soothing pleasure. For there is always hope that the fire will be extinguished

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22 Cupid, from cupidus—desire.
ON THE NATURE OF THE UNIVERSE

One man laughs at another, telling him to placate
Venus, because he is subject to such a degrading passion;
but does not see, poor fool, that his plight is the same!
The black one is "a honey," the slut a "sweet disorder,"
the green-eyed an "Athena," the stringy a "gazelle,"
the little runt is "one of the Graces—a sheer delight,"
the clumsy ox is "striking and so dignified,"
the stutterer "lips," the dumb one is "full of modesty,"
the nasty, spiteful termagant is "a lamp of learning,"
if she is too thin to live, she is "svelte and lissom,
if she is dying of consumption, she's "delicate,"
If her breasts are huge and swollen: "Ceres nursing Bacchus,"
the snub-nosed "Faun or Satyr," the thick-lipped "kissable—"
it would be a weary task to run through the whole list.
But even if she were all that could be desired,
without the charms of Venus radiating from her,
even so, there are others—we've lived without her till now!
She is no different, as we know, from the ugly ones;
she too will fumigate herself with rank perfumes
while all her maids avoid her and laugh behind her back.
But the weeping lover, shut our, will cover the threshold
and doop posts with flowers and wreaths and all manner of
anoint the door with perfume, sadly kiss the gateposts;
but once he is admitted, one whiff is all he needs
to make him look for a good excuse to take his leave.
No more dismal plaints, so many times rehearsed:
he damn himself for a fool, when he sees he has given her
more good qualities than any mortal deserves?
The Venuses know this full well, and take great pains
to hide all the backstage activity from those
whom they wish to keep enchanted in the bonds of love;
but all in vain, since you can see in your mind's eye
and drag into the daylight all the absurdities,
and if she is halfway decent, and not downright malicious,
then you in turn can make allowance for human weakness.
Nor does a woman always sigh with counterfeit passion,
when she embraces her lover, joining body to body,
holding his lips in a kiss and wetting them with her own.
Often her heart is in it, and she seeks mutual joys,
arousing him to run the race of love to the finish.
It is the same with birds and animals, wild and tame.
For cows and sheep and mares would never submit to the males,
unless their female nature were aroused and in heat,
so that their resistance is overcome by lust.
Do you not see how couples linked by mutual pleasure
are at the same time tortured by their common chains?
How often dogs at the crossroads, trying to pull apart,
tug and pull with all their might in different directions,
while they are held fast in the chains of mighty Venus.
But they would never do this if they did not feel
the mutual joys which, mocking them, hold them in bondage.
So I say again and again, the pleasure is shared.

In the mingling of the seed, sometimes the woman,
with sudden force, overpowers the man, and then the children,
born of maternal seed, will resemble more the mother;
but if from paternal seed, the father. The children you see
resembling both their parents, having the features of both,
have been created from father's body and mother's blood,
when the seeds course through the bodies excited by Venus,
in harmony of mutual passion, breathing as one,
with neither conquering and neither being conquered.
Sometimes it happens that the children will resemble
the grandparents, or even look like the great-grandparents:
this is because the parents often hide in their bodies
many latent seeds, mingled in diverse ways,
which are handed down from generation to generation:
and from these Venus makes forms in various assortments,
reproducing the face and voice and hair of ancestors.
Since the characteristics do not come from fixed seeds
any more than our faces and bodies and our limbs,
female children can also come from father's seeds.

99 Some ed. place lines 1225, 1226 after 1228.
and male offspring are produced from maternal stock. The embryo, in fact, consists of seeds from both. But whichever parent the child resembles most, from that parent the greater number of atoms have come; and this is true whether the child is male or female.

But it is not the gods that make men impotent, that they may never be called father by sweet children, but pass their lives instead in barren, sterile wedlock; though many would believe this and even sprinkle altars with sacrificial blood and smoke from offerings, hoping that their wives will thereby be made pregnant. But in vain they weary the gods and power of Fate. They are barren either because the seed is too coarse, or else because it is too thin and watery. The thin seeds cannot stick and adhere where they belong and so they slip away, and return without effect. The coarse seeds, on the other hand, are packed together and either do not move with impetus enough, or else they cannot penetrate where they are needed, or having penetrated, cannot mix with the female. Thus harmony in marriage is of great importance. Some men impregnate some women more easily than others, some women conceive by some men rather than by others. Many women who were barren in their first marriage, later have found they could conceive by other husbands, and thus they could enjoy the blessings of sweet offspring. And men whose previously fertile wives could not conceive, have later found a mate of complementary nature and so they fortified their latter years with children. Thus it is very important that the seeds be matched, so that they will be suitable for generation, the coarse seed with the thin, the thin seed with the coarse. It also makes a difference what food one eats, for some kinds of food make the seed thick in the body, and other kinds will make it thin and watery. Another important factor is the very position of intercourse; for it is thought that women conceive more readily in a prone position, like animals, so as to give an easier access to the seed, when breasts are pointing down and loins are lifted high. Wives surely have no need of such seductive movements, for a woman makes it difficult to conceive if she aids the man's motions by moving her hips and by a flexible undulation of her breasts. For in this way she diverts the plowshare from the furrow and make the seed's impact fall in the wrong place. This is why prostitutes use these seductive, wriggling motions, so that they will not be made pregnant too often, and at the same time, give more pleasure to the men—but obviously our wives have no need of such things.27

It is not the power of gods, or Cupid's arrows that make a homely woman the object of man's love. For a woman sometimes, by her conduct, brings it about by being neat and clean and having charming manners, that a man can easily learn to live with her. Furthermore, it is only habit that makes for love. For when a thing is struck repeatedly by light blows, in the end it will succumb and be defeated. Have you not seen how drops of water, always falling upon a stone, at last will wear away its surface?

End of Book IV.
came forth in those first days, when earth and air were young. First the race of wingèd creatures, the various birds came forth from their eggs, hatched in the warm springtime, just as now, in summer, cicadas leave their husks of their own accord, to seek their life and food. Then the earth brought forth the race of animals. For there was much heat and moisture in the fields, and wherever a convenient place could be found, wombs would take root in the earth, and when in due time the infant creatures reached the age for breaking these bladders, fleeing from the moisture and seeking the open air, Nature caused the pores of the earth to open, and thence a liquid similar to milk came from the channels, just as happens now, when a woman has given birth and she is filled with sweet, fresh milk, because the flow of nourishment is all directed into her breasts. So earth gave food to the infants, and the warmth clothed them, and the grasses gave them a soft and downy bed. And when the world was young, there were no extremes of cold and no excessive heat, and no sharp, violent winds, for all things grow and gather strength at the same rate. So I say again and again, the earth deserves the name of Mother, since she gave birth to the human race, and, in due season, to all the races of animals that wildly roam abroad over all the mighty mountains, and all the birds of the air, in all their varied shapes. But there had to be a limit to her parturition, and so she ceased, like a woman worn out by old age. For time can change the nature of the universe, and one class of things must change into another class, and nothing remains the same, but all things are in flux, and Nature compels all things to be transmuted and changed. One thing crumbles and decays with advancing age, another comes of age, emerging from humble state. And thus does time change the nature of the universe, and one phase of the earth gives way and becomes another; she cannot produce what she did, but bears what she could not before.
Many monsters the earth attempted to create
ones with fantastic shapes, grotesque in their appearance:
the hermaphrodite, neither man nor woman, but partly both,
and creatures with no feet, and some without any hands;
and some were mute without a mouth; some blind, with no face;
and some with all their limbs adhering to their bodies,
unable to do anything or go anywhere,
shun dangers, or to take whatever they might need.
So with all the monsters and grotesque things she made,
it was in vain: for Nature did not let them grow,
they could not reach the flower of maturity,
they could not find their food, nor join in the arts of Venus.
For we know that living things need many factors
in conjunction, to reproduce their several species.
First of all they need food, then the genital seeds
must be able to leave the body and be discharged,
and in order for male and female to be united,
they must have some means of exchanging mutual pleasures.
So many kinds of creatures must have become extinct,
unable to propagate and reproduce their species;
for whatever kind you see drawing life’s breath,
its cunning or its courage or at least its speed
must have preserved it from its earliest time of life;
and there are many others which have been preserved
by mankind because of their usefulness to us.
First, the savage tribe of lions has been protected
by their courage, the fox by cunning, the deer by speed.
But the alert, intelligent, and faithful dog
and all the animals that we call beasts of burden,
the fleecy sheep and all the horned breeds of cattle,
all these have been entrusted to our protection, Memmius.
for these creatures have fled the wild beasts and sought peace,
and the generous meals, got by no effort of theirs,
which we give them as a reward for their service to us.
But those without these natural assets, who were unable
either to live on their own, or else to be of use
to human beings, in return for which mankind

would let them feed in safety under our protection,
these were at the mercy of predatory creatures,
and caught up in the meshes of their own destiny,
until Nature brought their race to its extinction.

But Centaurs could never have existed, and never can—
creatures of a double nature and twofold body
combining unequal types of limbs in a single being
so that the two halves would be equally balanced.18
And here is proof that any fool can understand.
The horse reaches his prime of life at the age of three,
which is not the case with a boy, for at this very age
he still is suckling in his sleep at his mother’s breast.
But afterwards, when the horse’s powers begin to fail,
and his limbs are weakening with advancing age,
then the youth reaches his prime, his bloom of life,
and then his cheeks are first clothed with their soft down.
So you must not imagine that Centaurs can exist,
composed of men combined with the animal seed of horses,
or a Scylla, half a monster of the sea,
with a girdle of wild dogs, or any similar monster,
in which we see these incompatible hybrid species
which do not reach their prime together, nor their full strength,
not lose their vigor at the same time, as they grow old,
not burn with equal passions, nor have similar habits,
not find the same things giving pleasure to their bodies.
For bearded goats are often seen to thrive on hemlock,
but this same substance is for us a deadly poison.
Then again, since fire is wont to singe and burn
the tawny bodies of lions, or any other creatures
in the world, whichever consist of flesh and blood,
how could there be a Chimaera with a triple body,
a lion in front, a snake behind, and goat in the middle,
breathing out fierce flames and fires from its body?
So anyone that thinks such animals could have existed,

18 The text is corrupt here, and this line has been much emended.
even in the days when heaven and earth were new, fatuously relying on this one word "new"— could just as well say a host of other silly things: that rivers of gold were flowing all about the world, that trees in those days commonly bore gems for flowers, that men were born with such great power in their limbs that they could easily stride across the deepest seas and spin the firmament around with their bare hands. For even though there were many seeds of things in the earth at that time when she first gave birth to living creatures, this does not mean that hybrid monsters could have existed, mingling the limbs of various animals in one creature; just as plants and grains and trees that now exist and spring forth from the earth in luxuriant profusion, cannot be mingled and cross-bred to make composites, but each one grows in its own way, and all of them retain their properties according to Nature's laws.

The human beings that lived in those days in the fields were a tougher sort of people, as the tough earth had made them, their bones were bigger and their skeletons more solid, and they were fastened to the flesh with tougher sinews, and more or less impervious to heat and cold and unaccustomed foods or any bodily ailments. They lived for many revolutions of the sun, roaming far and wide in the manner of wild beasts. They were not sturdy farmers who turned the curved plowshare, for they did not know how to work the land with iron, nor had they learned to plant the new shoots in the ground or how to prune dead branches from the trees with a sickle. What the sun and rain bestowed, and what the earth produced of her own accord, this was enough for them. Their hunger was satisfied among acorn-bearing oak trees; the arbutus-berries we see ripen in the winter, with their bright red color, in those days the earth bore in great abundance, and larger than today. And the earth in her infancy gave other foods besides.

BOOK V

hard, but good-enough for miserable mortals. Rivers and springs invited them to slake their thirst, just as now the rushing torrents from the mountains call the thirsty animals from far and wide. And they lived in the well-known woodland homes of the Nymphs, from which they knew that running streams of water trickled, bathing the wet rocks in ever-abundant showers and dripping down in rivulets on the verdant moss, and gushing forth at times upon the level plain. They knew nothing yet of the art of working with fire, nor did they use the skins of animals for clothing, but they lived in woods and forests and mountain caves and they hid their hairy bodies in the bushes, to escape the whipping winds and rushing rains. They never took any thought at all for the common weal, and they had no ideas of moral codes or laws. Every man lived for himself and for himself alone, happy with whatever prowess Fortune bestowed. And Venus joined the bodies of lovers in the forest; for they were brought together by mutual desire, or by the frenzied force and violent lust of the man, or by a bribe of acorns, pears, or arbutus-berries.

And with the enormous power of their hands and feet they hunted the wild animals in the woodland paths, by throwing stones and wielding clubs of ponderous weight. Many they conquered; from a few they fled to caves; and when night overtook them, they flung their savage limbs naked on the ground, like so many bristly boars, making for themselves rough beds of leaves and branches. They did not wander terrified in nocturnal shadows seeking the sunlight and the day with lamentations, but rested quietly, buried in tranquil slumber, until the sun with his ruddy torch rekindled the heavens. For since they had been accustomed from their earliest childhood to see the light and dark in alternating sequence, they never could have been perplexed or struck with wonder