



## Poems

William Cullen Bryant

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### FOREST HYMN.

THE groves were God's first temples. Ere man learned  
To hew the shaft, and lay the architrave,  
And spread the roof above them,—ere he framed  
The lofty vault, to gather and roll back  
The sound of anthems; in the darkling wood.  
Amidst the cool and silence, he knelt down  
And offered to the Mightiest, solemn thanks  
And supplication. For his simple heart  
Might not resist the sacred influences,  
Which, from the stilly twilight of the place,  
And from the gray old trunks that high in heaven  
Mingled their mossy boughs, and from the sound  
Of the invisible breath that swayed at once  
All their green tops, stole over him, and bowed  
His spirit with the thought of boundless power  
And inaccessible majesty. Ah, why  
Should we, in the world's riper years, neglect  
God's ancient sanctuaries, and adore  
Only among the crowd, and under roofs  
That our frail hands have raised. Let me, at least,  
Here, in the shadow of this aged wood,  
Offer one hymn—thrice happy, if it find  
Acceptance in his ear.

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Father, thy hand  
Hath reared these venerable columns, thou  
Didst weave this verdant roof. Thou didst look down  
Upon the naked earth, and, forthwith, rose  
All these fair ranks of trees. They, in thy sun,  
Budded, and shook their green leaves in thy breeze,  
And shot towards heaven. The century-living crow,  
Whose birth was in their tops, grew old and died

Among their branches, till, at last, they stood,  
As now they stand, massy, and tall, and dark,  
Fit shrine for humble worshipper to hold  
Communion with his Maker. These dim vaults,  
These winding aisles, of human pomp or pride  
Report not. No fantastic carvings show,  
The boast of our vain race to change the form  
Of thy fair works. But thou art here—thou fill'st  
The solitude. Thou art in the soft winds,  
That run along the summit of these trees  
In music;—thou art in the cooler breath,  
That from the inmost darkness of the place,  
Comes, scarcely felt;—the barky trunks, the ground,  
The fresh moist ground, are all instinct with thee.  
Here is continual worship;—nature, here,  
In the tranquillity that thou dost love,  
Enjoys thy presence. Noiselessly, around,  
From perch to perch, the solitary bird  
Passes; and yon clear spring, that, 'midst its herbs,  
Wells softly forth and visits the strong roots  
Of half the mighty forest, tells no tale  
Of all the good it does. Thou hast not left

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Thyself without a witness, in these shades,  
Of thy perfections. Grandeur, strength, and grace  
Are here to speak of thee. This mighty oak—  
By whose immoveable stem I stand and seem  
Almost annihilated—not a prince,  
In all that proud old world beyond the deep,  
E'er wore his crown as loftily as he  
Wears the green coronal of leaves with which  
Thy hand has graced him. Nestled at his root  
Is beauty, such as blooms not in the glare  
Of the broad sun. That delicate forest flower  
With scented breath, and look so like a smile,  
Seems, as it issues from the shapeless mould,  
An emanation of the indwelling Life,  
A visible token of the upholding Love,  
That are the soul of this wide universe.

My heart is awed within me, when I think  
Of the great miracle that still goes on,  
In silence, round me—the perpetual work  
Of thy creation, finished, yet renewed  
For ever. Written on thy works I read  
The lesson of thy own eternity.

Lo! all grow old and die—but see, again,  
How on the faltering footsteps of decay  
Youth presses—ever gay and beautiful youth  
In all its beautiful forms. These lofty trees  
Wave not less proudly that their ancestors  
Moulder beneath them. Oh, there is not lost  
One of earth's charms: upon her bosom yet,

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After the flight of untold centuries,  
The freshness of her far beginning lies  
And yet shall lie. Life mocks the idle hate  
Of his arch enemy Death—yea, seats himself  
Upon the tyrant's throne—the sepulchre,  
And of the triumphs of his ghastly foe  
Makes his own nourishment. For he came forth  
From thine own bosom, and shall have no end.

There have been holy men who hid themselves  
Deep in the woody wilderness, and gave  
Their lives to thought and prayer, till they outlived  
The generation born with them, nor seemed  
Less aged than the hoary trees and rocks  
Around them;—and there have been holy men  
Who deemed it were not well to pass life thus.  
But let me often to these solitudes  
Retire, and in thy presence reassure  
My feeble virtue. Here its enemies,  
The passions, at thy plainer footsteps shrink  
And tremble and are still. Oh, God! when thou  
Dost scare the world with tempests, set on fire  
The heavens with falling thunderbolts, or fill,  
With all the waters of the firmament,  
The swift dark whirlwind that uproots the woods  
And drowns the villages; when, at thy call,  
Uprises the great deep and throws himself  
Upon the continent, and overwhelms  
Its cities—who forgets not, at the sight  
Of these tremendous tokens of thy power,

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His pride, and lays his strifes and follies by?  
Oh, from these sterner aspects of thy face  
Spare me and mine, nor let us need the wrath

Of the mad unchained elements to teach  
Who rules them. Be it ours to meditate  
In these calm shades thy milder majesty,  
And to the beautiful order of thy works  
Learn to conform the order of our lives.

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