

1842

A HYMN OF THE SEA

William Cullen Bryant

Bryant, William Cullen (1794-1878) - American poet and editor of the New York Evening Post who practiced law before devoting his life to writing. A master of blank verse, Bryant's earliest works are considered his best. A Hymn of the Sea (1842) - Opening lines: The sea is mighty, but a mightier sways / His restless billows. Thou, whose hands have scooped...

A HYMN OF THE SEA

The sea is mighty, but a mightier sways
 His restless billows. Thou, whose hands have scooped
 His boundless gulfs and built his shore, thy breath,
 That moved in the beginning o'er his face,
 Moves o'er it evermore. The obedient waves
 To its strong motion roll and rise and fall.
 Still from that realm of rain thy cloud goes up,
 As at the first, to water the great earth,
 And keep her valleys green. A hundred realms
 Watch its broad shadow warping on the wind,
 And in the dropping shower, with gladness hear
 Thy promise of the harvest. I look forth
 Over the boundless blue, where joyously
 The bright crests of innumerable waves
 Glance to the sun at once, as when the hands
 Of a great multitude are upward flung
 In acclamation. I behold the ships
 Gliding from cape to cape, from isle to isle,
 Or stemming toward far lands, or hastening home
 From the Old World. It is thy friendly breeze
 That bears them, with the riches of the land,
 And treasure of dear lives, till, in the port,
 The shouting seaman climbs and furls the sail.

But who shall bide thy tempest, who shall face
 The blast that wakes the fury of the sea?
 O God! thy justice makes the world turn pale,
 When on the armed fleet, that royally
 Bears down the surges, carrying war, to smite
 Some city, or invade some thoughtless realm,
 Descends the fierce tornado. The vast hulks
 Are whirled like chaff upon the waves; the sails
 Fly, rent like webs of gossamer; the masts
 Are snapped asunder; downward from the decks,
 Downward are slung, into the fathomless gulf,
 Their cruel engines; and their hosts, arrayed
 In trappings of the battle-field, are whelmed
 By whirlpools, or dashed dead upon the rocks.
 Then stand the nations still with awe, and pause,
 A moment, from the bloody work of war.

These restless surges eat away the shores
Of earth's old continents; the fertile plain
Welters in shallows, headlands crumble down,
And the tide drifts the sea-sand in the streets
Of the drowned city. Thou, meanwhile, afar
In the green chambers of the middle sea,
Where broadest spread the waters and the line
Sinks deepest, while no eye beholds thy work,
Creator! thou dost teach the coral-worm
To lay his mighty reefs. From age to age,
He builds beneath the waters, till, at last,
His bulwarks overtop the brine, and check
The long wave rolling from the southern pole
To break upon Japan. Thou bidd'st the fires,
That smoulder under ocean, heave on high
The new-made mountains, and uplift their peaks,
A place of refuge for the storm-driven bird.
The birds and wafting billows plant the rifts
With herb and tree; sweet fountains gush; sweet airs
Ripple the living lakes that, fringed with flowers,
Are gathered in the hollows. Thou dost look
On thy creation and pronounce it good.
Its valleys, glorious in their summer green,
Praise thee in silent beauty, and its woods,
Swept by the murmuring winds of ocean, join
The murmuring shores in a perpetual hymn.

THE END