AND yet in those days not much more than now
Would generations of mortality
Leave the sweet light of fading life behind.
Indeed, in those days here and there a man,
More oftener snatched upon, and gulped by fangs,
Afforded the beasts a food that roared alive,
Echoing through groves and hills and forest trees,
Even as he saw his living flesh entombed
Within a living grave; whilst those whom flight
Had spared (with body eaten into) shrieked
(Pressing their quivering palms to loathsome sores)
With horrible voices for eternal death—
Until, forlorn of help, and witless what
Might medicine their wounds, the writhing pangs
Took them from life. But not in those far times
Would one lone day give over unto doom
A soldiery in thousands marching on
Beneath the battle-banners, nor would then
The ramping breakers of the main seas dash
Whole argosies and crews upon the rocks.
But ocean uprisen would often rave in vain,
Without all end or outcome, and give up
Its empty menacings as lightly too;
Nor soft seductions of a sérene sea
Could lure by laughing billows any man
Out to disaster; for the science bold
Of ship-sailing lay dark in those far times.
Again, 'twas then that lack of food gave o'er
Men's fainting limbs to dissolution; now

1 Passages from a forthcoming translation of the entire six books of De rerum natura.
'Tis plenty overwhelms. Unwary, they
Oft for themselves, themselves would then outpour
The poison; now, with nicer art, themselves
They give the drafts to others.

Book V, 1. 986 ff. (Guissani's text).

* * *

Now, Memmius,
How nature of iron discovered was, thou mayst
Of thine own self divine. Man's ancient arms
Were hands, and nails and teeth, stones too and boughs—
Breakage of forest trees—and flame and fire,
As soon as known. Thereafter, force of iron
And copper discovered was; and copper's use
Was known ere iron's, since more pliable
Its nature is and its abundance more.
With copper men to work the soil began,
With copper to rouse the hurly waves of war,
To straw the monstrous wounds, and seize away
Another's flocks and fields. For unto them,
Thus armèd, all things naked of defense
Readily yielded. Then by slow degrees
The sword of iron succeeded, and the shape
Of brazen sickle into scorn was turned;
With iron to cleave the soil of earth they 'gan,
And the contentions of uncertain war
Were rendered equal.

And, lo, man was wont
Armèd to mount upon the ribs of horse
And guide him with the rein, and play about
With right hand free, of times before he tried
Perils of war in yokèd chariot,
And yokèd pairs abreast came earlier
Than yokes of four, or scythèd chariots
Whereinto clomb the men at arms. And next
The Punic folk did train the elephants—
Those curst Lucanian oxen, hideous,
The serpent-handed, with turrets on their bulks—
To dure the wounds of war and panic-strike
The mighty troops of Mars. Thus Discord sad
Begat the one Thing after other, to be
The terror of the nations under arms,
And day by day to horrors of old war
She added an increase.

Bulls, too, they tried
In wars' grim business; and essayed to send
Outrageous boars against the foes. And some
Sent on before their ranks puissant lions
With armèd trainers and with masters fierce
To guide and hold in chains—and yet in vain,
Since, flesched and hot with hurly-burly slaughter,
Those beasts would wreck all order in the troops,
Shaking the frightful crests upon their heads,
Now here, now there. Nor could the horsemen calm
Their horses, panic-breasted at the roar,
And rein them around to front the foe. With spring
The infuriate she lions would upleap
Now here, now there; and whoso came apace
Against them, these they'd rend across the face;
And others unwitting from behind they'd tear
Down from their mounts, and, twining round them, bring
Tumbling to earth, o'ermastered by the wound,
And with those powerful fangs and hookèd claws
Fasten upon them. Bulls would toss their friends,
And trample under foot, and from beneath
Rip flanks and bellies of horses with their horns,
And with a threatening forehead jam the sod;
And boars would tear their allies with stout tusks,
Tingeing in fury with own blood the spears
Splintered in their own bodies, and would put
To rout and ruin infantry and horse.
For there the beasts-of-saddle tried to scape
The savage thrusts of tusk, by shying off,
Or rearing up with hoofs apaw in air.
In vain—since there thou mightest see them sink,
Their sinews severed, and with mighty fall
Bestrew the ground. And such of these as men
Supposed well-trainèd long ago at home,
Were in the thick of action seen to foam
In fury, from the wounds, the shrieks, the flight,
The panic and the tumult; nor could men
Aught of their numbers rally. For each breed
And various of the wild beasts fled apart
Hither or thither, as often in wars to-day
Flee those Lucanian oxen, by the steel
Sorely bemangled, after they have wrought
Upon their friends so many a dreadful doom.
If 'twas indeed that thus they did at all:
But scarcely I'll believe that men could not
With mind foreknow and see, as sure to come,
Such foul and general disaster. This
Thou canst maintain as true in the great All,
In divers molds on divers plans create,
More certainly than in some namèd land
Of the earth-sphere. But men chose this to do
Less in the hope of conquering than to give
Their enemies a goodly cause of woe,
(Even though thereby they perishèd themselves),
When weak in numbers and when wanting arms.

Book V, l. 1279 ff. (Guissani's text).