

The Oak and the Reed

one of Aesop's fables as told by Avianus (c. 400 AD)

translated by Adam F McCune

Original Latin

Montibus e summis radicitus eruta quercus
Decidit insani turbine victa noti.
Quam tumidis subter decurrens alveus undis
Suscipit et fluvio praecipitante rapit.
Verum ubi diversis inpellitur ardua ripis,
In fragiles calamos grande residit onus.
Tunc sic exiguo conectens caespite ramos
Miratur liquidis quod stet harundo vadis.
Se quoque tam vasto rectam non sistere trunco,
Ast illam tenui cortice ferre minas.
Stridula mox blando respondens canna susurro
Seque magis tutam debilitate docet.
“Tu rapidos,” inquit, “ventos saevasque procellas
Despicias et totis viribus acta ruis.
Ast ego surgentes paulatim demoror austros,
Et quamvis levibus provida cedo notis.
In tua praeruptus se fundit robora nimbus,
Motibus aura meis ludificata perit.”
Haec nos dicta movent magnis obsistere fluxa,
Paulatimque truces exsuperare minas.

English Translation

Upon a hill, an oak tree grew.
The whirlwind raved, the wild wind blew,
Tore up its roots and shook its crown:
The wind had won; the oak fell down.

A rising river ran below
And rushed the oak off in its flow.
Bounced by the banks as it proceeds,
It comes to rest in fragile reeds.

The oak's amazed that reeds which grow
In little clumps withstand the flow.
The great oak's trunk cannot stand tall,
But this thin reed endures it all.

But soon the creaking reed replies
In soothing murmurs soft as sighs,
And shows the oak it makes good sense:
Its weakness is its best defense.

The reed says, “You hold them in scorn,
The rushing wind, the raging storm.
Despite the strength within your core,
You fall in ruin on the shore.

“But where I can, I will give way,
And bit by bit I slow and play
With rising winds before they rise.
To bow before the breeze is wise.

“The rushing rainstorm bursts to flood
And overcomes your sturdy wood.
My movement and my mocking sway
Deceive the wind, which dies away.”

This shows the weak withstand the strong,
Whose wildest threat does not last long;
For those who bend do not succumb,
But bit by bit they overcome.