

The Oak and the Reed

(English translation by Eli Siegel)

The oak one day says to the reed:

—You have a good right to blame the nature of things:

A wren for you is a heavy thing to bear.

The slightest wind which is likely

To wrinkle the face of the water

Compels you to bow your head—

While my brow, like Mount Caucasus,

Not satisfied with catching the rays of the sun,

Resists the effort of the tempest.

All for you is north wind, all seems to me soft breeze.

Still, if you had been born in the protection of the foliage

The surrounding of which I cover,

I would defend you from the storm.

But you come to be most often

On the wet edges of the kingdoms of the wind.

Nature seems to me quite unjust to you.

—Your compassion, answered the shrub,

Arises from a kind nature; but leave off this care.

The winds are less fearful to me than to you.

I bend and do not break. You have until now

Against their frightening blows

Stood up without bending your back;

But look out for what can be. —As the reed said these words,

From the edge of the horizon furiously comes to them

The most terrible of the progeny

Which the North has till then contained within it.

The tree holds up well; the reed bends.

The wind doubles its trying;

And does so well that it uproots

That, the head of which was neighbor to the sky,

And the feet of which touched the empire of the dead.

Jean de La Fontaine (1621-1695), *Fables*, 1668.