

1978

# The Four Ages

John Hollander

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/iowareview>

Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Hollander, John. "The Four Ages." *The Iowa Review* 9.3 (1978): 96-97. Web.  
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.2427>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Iowa Review by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact [lib-ir@uiowa.edu](mailto:lib-ir@uiowa.edu).

## THE FOUR AGES · *John Hollander*

### I

Terribly unimportant kings  
Grimly gave each other rings.

### II

That was when the rings had become truly golden  
By being remembered dimly and made bright in  
The Great Fable that was itself the age, the age  
That was not the poor first but the rich harvesting  
Of cold grain smitten in the wind by early stones.  
The light of dawn was all eaten up in hunger  
For beginning again, when the vivid eye lived  
At subsistence level; it was only later  
On in the day when we saw what shining was all  
About, and when we could afford comparisons  
Of this with that and then and now, and time  
And space lay all about us waiting to be used.  
We remember the first age now only to give  
The lie, which is its great truth, to this later one.

### III

After that there was only one age; it appeared to be one of a series, but its followers were all parts of it. Bronze fell off to iron in the chains of fable, and rose to steel in the technological degrees, but gold, brass, pinchbeck and shoddy were all corners of the same room: one could stand in one or another, but one was equally unwarmed by the fading coals in the vast grate. This was the time and place of where we still are and probably will be, and it is hard to tell whether one is better off knowing this or not.

### IV

And then? Even if we imagined some  
Entirely different kind of time, or place  
For whatever would happen next to fiddle  
With—even if unimaginable

Phases in the prolonged existences  
Of such barely imaginable things  
As our lust for exemplifying might  
Cause us to strain for were at hand to build  
A last age from, the whole thing would collapse  
Into the rubble of the third again.  
It would be like the wings toward which a sad  
Vaudeville clown would turn for respite, only  
To find himself bounced back on stage once more.  
A kind of negative apocalypse  
Keeps ruining not what has gone before  
But what would stand for everything to come  
After the paling series of before.  
Almost as if the treasure of a last  
Time, a final place, where to be guarded  
As jealously as an origination,  
Or a vacuum-surrounded metal metre  
Kept in a bureau of eternal standards.  
But it is not that "And so, we are back  
Where we started from"; rather, we have come  
To an understanding of the age we have  
And will have, of the sense of an unending  
That, given our own ends, we settle for  
As easily as into a firm chair  
At a clear table with an empty page  
Beginning to wrinkle already now  
Its wide brow, puzzled by our moving hand  
What it will do and what it will not do——  
But yielding up its blank simplicity.