

CHAPTER ONE



ON THE SHORTNESS OF LIFE

1.

Most of humanity, my Paulinus*, complains of the unkindness of Nature, because we are born only for a short space of time, and this allotted period of life runs away so swiftly, so hurriedly, that with but few exceptions a person's life comes to an end just as they are preparing to enjoy it.

It's not just the common or ignorant person who mourns this universal misfortune. It has brought complaints even from the greatest of people. Hence comes that well-known saying of physicians, that art is long but life is short. Hence arose that quarrel, so unbefitting a

*Pompeius Paulinus, most probably the father of Seneca's wife Pompeia Paulina. From a noble family, he was for a time praefectus annonae, in charge of the distribution of grain in Rome.

sage, which Aristotle picked with Nature, because she had allowed some animals to live for ten or fifteen centuries, while humans, although capable of many and great exploits, had the term of their existence cut so much shorter.* We do not have a very short time assigned to us, but we lose a great deal of it. Life is long enough to carry out the most important projects – we have ample time, if we arrange it properly. But when it all runs to waste through luxury and carelessness, when it is not devoted to any good purpose, then at the last we are forced to feel that it is all over, although we never noticed how it glided away. So it is: we do not receive a short life, but we make it a short one, and we are not poor in days, but wasteful of them. When great and kinglike riches fall into the hands of a bad master, they are dispersed straightaway. But even a moderate fortune, when given to a wise guardian, increases by use. In the same way, life has great opportunities for one who knows how to use it to the best advantage.

2.

Why do we complain about Nature? She has been kind to us. Life is long enough, if you know how to use it. One man is possessed by a greed which nothing can

*In his writings on animals, Aristotle advanced the theory that larger animals significantly outlived smaller ones. Seneca may be exaggerating Aristotle's theory here.

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satisfy, another by a laborious diligence in doing what is totally useless. Another is sodden by wine, another is numbed by sloth. One man is exhausted by an ambition which makes him court the goodwill of others, while another, through his eagerness as a merchant, is led to visit every land and every sea by the hope of gain. Some are plagued by the love of war, and are always either endangering other men's lives or in trembling for their own. Some wear away their lives in that voluntary slavery, the unrequited service of great men. Many are occupied either in laying claim to other men's fortune or in complaining of their own. A great number have no clear purpose, and are tossed from one new scheme to another by a rambling, inconsistent, dissatisfied, fickle habit of mind. Some care for no object enough to try to attain it, but lie lazily yawning until their fate comes upon them. So I cannot doubt the truth of that verse which the greatest of poets expressed in the style of an oracle:

We live only a small part of our lives.

We experience time, but not life. Vices press upon us and surround us on every side, and do not permit us to regain our feet, or to raise our eyes and gaze upon truth. Instead they keep us prostrate and chained to low desires. People who are in this condition are never allowed to come to themselves. If ever

by chance they obtain any rest, they roll to and fro like the deep sea, which heaves and tosses after a gale, and they never have any respite from their lusts. Do you think I'm speaking only of the notorious or bad people? No, look at wealthy people: they are choked by their own good things. Riches prove a heavy burden for them. How many men's eloquence and continual desire to display their own cleverness has cost them their lives? How many are sallow with constant sensual indulgence? How many have no freedom left them by the tribe of clients that surges around them? Look through all these, from the lowest to the highest: this man calls his friends to support him, this one is present in court, this one is the defendant, this one pleads for him, this one is on the jury. But no one lays claim to his own self; everyone wastes his time over someone else.

Look closely at those men whose names are in everyone's mouth: you will find that they are all like. A is devoted to B, and B to C: no one belongs to himself. Moreover, some men are full of most irrational anger: they complain of the insolence of their chiefs, because they have not granted them an audience when they wished for it – as if a man had any right to complain of being so haughtily shut out by another, when he never seems to have the time to give his own conscience a hearing. This chief of yours, whoever he is, though he may look at you in an offensive manner,

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still will someday look at you, open his ears to your words, and give you a seat by his side. But you never try to look upon *yourself*, to listen to your own voice. You should not claim anything from another, because when you were seeking something from them it wasn't that you wished for their company, only that you could not stand your own.

3.

If all the brightest intellects of all time employed themselves on this one subject, they could never sufficiently express their wonder at this blindness of people's minds. People will not allow anyone to steal their property, and on the most trifling dispute about the measuring of boundaries they will take up stones and cudgels. Yet they allow others to encroach upon their *lives*, indeed help others to take possession of them. You cannot find anyone who wants to give away their money; yet among how many people does everyone distribute their life? People covetously guard their property from waste, but when it comes to waste of time, they are prodigal in the one thing where they should be sparing.

Let's take an old person, and say to him, 'We see you have arrived at the extreme limits of human life; you are in your hundredth year, or even older. Come now, and take stock of your whole life in black and white. Tell us how much of your time has been spent

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on your creditors, how much on your mistress, how much on your king, how much on your clients, how much in quarrelling with your wife, how much in keeping your slaves in order, how much in running up and down the city on business. Add to this the diseases which we bring upon us with our own hands, and the time we have let slip by without making any use of it; you will see that you have not lived as many years as you count. Look back in your memory and see how often you have been consistent in your projects, how many days passed as you intended them to do, how often you kept the same face and didn't let your spirit quail, how much work you have done in so long a time, how many people have without your knowledge stolen parts of your life from you, how much you have lost, how large a part has been taken up by useless grief, foolish gladness, greedy desire, or polite conversation, how little of yourself is left to you. You will then see that you have died before your time.'

Why does this happen? People live as though they thought they would live forever. You never remember your human frailty. You never notice how much of your time has already gone by. You spend it as though you had an abundant and overflowing store of it, though all the while that day which you devote to some man or to some thing is perhaps your last. You fear everything, like the mortals you are, and yet you

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desire everything as if you were immortals. You will hear many say, 'After my fiftieth year I will give myself up to leisure; my sixtieth shall be my last year of public office.' And what guarantee have you that your life will last any longer? Who will let all this go on just as you have arranged it? Are you not ashamed to reserve only the end of your life for yourself, and appoint for the enjoyment of your own right mind only that time which you cannot devote to any business? How late it is to begin life just when we have to be leaving it! What a foolish forgetfulness of our mortality, to put off carefully considered plans until our fiftieth or sixtieth year, and to decide that our lives will begin at a point which few of us ever reach.

4.

You will hear the most powerful and highly placed people remarking that they long for leisure, praise it, and prefer it to all the blessings which they enjoy. Sometimes they would even descend from their lofty position, if it could be safely done. For Fortune collapses by its own weight, without any shock or interference from without. The late Emperor Augustus, upon whom the gods bestowed more blessings than anyone else, never stopped praying for rest and exemption from the troubles of empire. He used to enliven his labours with this sweet, though unreal consolation, that he would someday live for himself

alone. In a letter which he addressed to the Senate, after promising that his future time of rest would not be devoid of dignity or discredit to his former glories, he said: 'Such things are more honourable to do than to promise; but my eagerness for that time, so earnestly longed for, has led me to derive a certain pleasure just from speaking about it, even though the reality is still far distant.' He thought leisure so important, that though he could not actually enjoy it, he did so by anticipation and by thinking about it. He, who saw everything depending upon himself alone, who swayed the fortunes of people and of nations, thought that his happiest day would be that on which he laid aside his greatness. He knew by experience how much labour was involved in that glory that shone through all lands, and how much secret anxiety was concealed within it. He had been forced to assert his rights by war, first with his countrymen, next with his colleagues, and lastly with his own relations, and had shed blood both by sea and by land. After marching his troops under arms through Macedonia, Sicily, Egypt, Syria, Asia Minor, and almost all the countries of the world, when they were weary with slaughtering Romans he had directed them against a foreign foe. While he was pacifying the Alpine regions, and subduing the enemies whom he found in the midst of the Roman empire, while he was extending its boundaries beyond the Rhine,

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the Euphrates, and the Danube, at Rome itself the swords of Murena, Caepio, Lepidus, Egnatius*, and others were being sharpened to slay him. Scarcely had he escaped from their plot, when his already failing age was terrified by his daughter and all the noble youths who were pledged to her cause by adultery with her by way of oath of fidelity. Then there was Paulus's and Antonius's mistress, a second time to be feared by Rome. And when he had cut out these ulcers from his very limbs, others grew in their place. The empire, like a body overloaded with blood, was always breaking out somewhere. For this reason he longed for leisure. All his labours were based upon hopes and thoughts of leisure. This was the wish of one person who could accomplish the wishes of all other people.

5.

While tossed here and there by Catiline and Clodius, Pompey and Crassus†, by some open enemies and some doubtful friends, while he struggled with the struggling republic and kept it from going to ruin,

*The men who conspired against Emperor Augustus in the years between 29 and 22 BCE.

†When Marcus Tullius Cicero was co-consul in 63 CE, he had to uncover and suppress the Catilinarian Conspiracy, involving disgruntled aristocratic senators in league with Roman army veterans.

when at last he was banished, being neither able to keep silence in prosperity nor to endure adversity with patience, how often must Marcus Cicero have cursed that consulship of his which he never ceased to praise, and which he nevertheless deserved? What piteous expressions he uses in a letter to Atticus when Pompey the Elder had been defeated, and his son was recruiting his shattered forces in Spain. ‘Do you ask’, he writes, ‘what I am doing here? I am living in my Tusculan villa almost as a prisoner’. He goes on to lament his former life, complains of the present, and despairs of the future. Cicero calls himself ‘half a prisoner’, but by God, this wise man never should have come under so lowly a title. He never would be half a prisoner, but always enjoy complete and entire liberty, being free, in his own power, and greater than all others. Because what can be greater than the man who is greater than Fortune?

6.

When Livius Drusus, a vigorous and energetic man, brought forward bills for new laws and radical measures of the Gracchus pattern*, he represented a vast mob of all the peoples of Italy. But seeing no way to solve the question, since he was not allowed to deal

*That is, laws for social reform that were considered extreme by the patricians and knights in the Senate.

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with it as he wished, and yet was not free to give it up having started it, complained bitterly of his life, which had been one of unrest from the very cradle, and said, we are told, that 'he was the only person who had never had any holidays even when he was a boy'. Indeed, while he was still underage and wearing the praetexta, he had the courage to plead the cause of accused persons in court, and to make use of his influence so powerfully that it is well known that in some causes his exertions gained a verdict. Where would such precocious ambition stop? You may be sure that one who showed such boldness as a child would end by becoming a great pest both in public and in private life. But it was too late for him to complain that he had had no holidays, when from his boyhood he had been a firebrand and a nuisance in the courts. It is an open question whether he committed suicide. He fell by a sudden wound in the groin, and some doubted whether his death was caused by his own hand, though none disputed its having happened at the right time. It would be superfluous to mention more who, while others thought them the happiest of men, expressed their real feelings, and loathed all that they had done for all the years of their lives. Yet in making these complaints it did not bring any change either for themselves or others. For after these words have escaped them their feelings revert to their accustomed frame. My God, the life of you

great men, even though it should last for more than a thousand years, is still a very short one. Those vices of yours would swallow up any extent of time. No wonder if this our ordinary span, which, though Nature hurries on, can be enlarged by common sense, soon slips away from you. You do not lay hold of it or hold it back, and try to delay the swiftest of all things; instead you let it pass as though it were a useless thing and you could easily replace it.

7.

But right now I'm thinking of those who devote their time to nothing but drinking and debauchery. None are more shameful in the use of their time. Others, although the glory which they pursue is vain, still deserve some credit for their pursuit of it. You may tell me of misers, of angry men, of men who hate and who even wage war without a cause – they are just men being men. But the sin of those who are given up to gluttony and lust is a disgraceful one. Examine all the hours of their lives: consider how much time they spend in calculation, how much in plotting, how much in fear, how much in giving and deceiving flattery, how much in entering into getting things for themselves or for others, how much in banquets (which indeed become a serious business), you will see that they are not allowed any breathing time either by their pleasures or their pains.

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Nothing, neither eloquence nor literature, can be done properly by one who is occupied with something else; because nothing can take deep root in a mind which is directed to some other subject, and which rejects whatever you try to stuff into it. No one knows less about living than a busy person: there is nothing about which it is more difficult to gain knowledge. Other arts have many people everywhere who profess to teach them: some of them can be so thoroughly learned by mere boys, and can be easily taught. But one's whole life must be spent in learning how to live, and this may surprise you more: one's whole life must be spent in learning how to die. Many excellent people have freed themselves from all hindrances, have given up riches, business, and pleasure, and have made it their duty to the very end of their lives to learn how to live. And yet most of them die confessing that they do not yet know how to live, and still less know how to live as a wise person. Believe me, it requires a great person and one who is superior to human frailties not to allow any of their time to be filched from them. It follows that their life is a very long one, because they devote every possible part of it to themselves; no portion lies idle or uncultivated, or in another person's power. They find nothing worthy of being exchanged for their time, which they guard most grudgingly. They, therefore, have time enough. Whereas those who gave up a great part of their lives

to public service do not have enough. They are sometimes conscious of their loss. You will sometimes hear people troubled with great wealth cry out, amid their hosts of clients, their pleadings in court, and their other honourable troubles, 'I am not allowed to live my own life.' Why are they not allowed? Because all those who call upon them for help distract them. How many of their days have been spent on that defendant? By that candidate for office? By that old woman who is weary with attending her family funerals? By that man who pretends to be ill, in order to excite the greed of those who hope to inherit his property? By that powerful friend of yours, who uses you to swell his entourage, not to be his friend?

Balance your account, and look over all the days of your life. You will see that only a very few days, and only those which were useless for any other purpose, have been left to you. He who has obtained the *fascēs** for which he longed, is eager to get rid of them, and is constantly saying, 'When will this year be over?' Another puts on public games, and once would have given a great deal for the chance of doing so, but now says, 'when can I escape from this?' Another is a lawyer who is fought for in all the courts, and who draws immense audiences, who crowd all the forum

* Bundles of wooden rods, representing the power of a Roman magistrate.

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to a far greater distance than they can hear him. 'When', says the lawyer, 'will vacation time come?' Every person hurries through their life, and suffers from a yearning for the future and a weariness of the present. But the person who organizes all their time for their own purposes, who arranges all their days as though they were arranging the plan of their life, neither wishes for nor fears the future. Because what new pleasure can be provided that they do not already have? They are fully satisfied with what they have now. Fortune may do what she will, but their life is already safe from her. Such people may gain something, but cannot lose anything. And indeed, they can only gain anything in the same way as one who is already glutted and filled can get some extra food which they take although do not want.

You have no grounds, therefore, for supposing that anyone has lived long, just because they have wrinkles or grey hairs. They have not lived long, but merely existed for a certain duration. Would you think that a person had travelled far if a fierce gale had caught them as soon as they left their port, and had been driven round and round the same place continually by a succession of winds blowing from opposite quarters? Such a person has not *travelled*, they have just been tossed about.

8.

I am filled with wonder when I see some people asking others for their time, and those who are asked for it most willing to give it. Both parties consider the object for which the time is given, but neither thinks of the time itself that is involved. We play with what is the most precious of all things, yet it escapes our notice because it is not a physical thing, and does not come before our eyes. Therefore we think it very cheap, and put hardly any value on it. People set the greatest store by financial gifts or pensions, and hire out their work, their services, or their care in order to gain them. No one values time; they give it much more freely, as though it cost nothing. Yet you will see these same people clasping the knees of their physician when they are sick and in present danger of death. And if threatened with capital punishment they are willing to give all that they possess in order that they may live longer. This is how inconsistent they are. If the number of every person's future years could be laid before them, as we can lay out their past years, how anxious would they be if they could see they only had a few years to live, and how careful about their remaining days? Yet it is easy to manage the distribution of a quantity, however small, if we know how much there is. We are very careful about things when we don't know when they will run out.

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Yet we shouldn't presume that people have no idea of the value of time. They will often say to those they especially love that they will give them a part of their own years. They do give them, but in such a manner that it is their loss and not the other's gain. Because they don't know where they got their time, they are given to waste it. Yet no one will give you back your years, no one will restore them to you again. Your life will run its course once it has begun, and will neither begin again or reverse what it has done. It will make no announcements, it will give you no warning of how fast it flies; it will move silently on. It will not prolong itself at the command of a king, or at the wish of a nation; as it started on its first day, so it will run. It will never turn aside, never delay. What's the result? You're 'busy', but *life* is hurrying on! Death will be here some time or other, and you must serve him, whether you like it or not.

9.

Is anything more insane than the ideas of 'intelligent' people about how to spend our time in order to make the most of the future? They work hard in order that they may live better. They prepare themselves for life at the expense of actually living, planning carefully for the future. Yet postponement is the greatest waste of life; it wrings day after day from us, and takes

away the present by promising something to come. There is no bigger obstacle to true living than waiting, which loses today while it is depending on tomorrow. You claim as yours that which is in the hand of Fortune, and you let go that which is in your own hand. Where are you looking, where are you stretching forward? Everything future is uncertain, so live now. See how the greatest of poets* cries to you and sings in wholesome verse as though inspired with heavenly fire:

The best of wretched mortals' days is that
Which is the first to fly.

Why do you hesitate, he says; why do you stand back? Unless you seize it, time will have fled; and even if you do seize it, it will still fly. Our alacrity in making use of our time should compete with the swiftness of time itself, and we should drink of it as we should of a fast-running torrent which will not be always running. The poet admirably satirizes our boundless thoughts when he says, not 'the first *age*', but 'the first *day*'. Why are you careless and slow while time is flying so fast, and why do you spread out before yourself a vision of long months and years, as many as your greediness requires? He talks with you about one day,

*Virgil, *Georgics*.

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and that a fast-fleeting one. There can, then, be no doubt that the best days for mortals are the first, whose minds are still in their childhood when old age comes upon them, and they reach it unprepared and without arms to combat it. They have never looked forward. They have all of a sudden stumbled upon old age, never noticing that it was stealing upon them day by day. Just as conversation, or reading, or deep thought deceives travellers, and they find themselves at their journey's end before they knew that it was drawing near, so in this fast and never-ceasing journey of life, which we make at the same pace whether we are asleep or awake, busy people never notice that they are moving till they are at the end of it.

10.

If I chose to divide this argument into separate steps, supported by evidence, many things occur to me by which I could prove that the lives of busy people are the shortest of all. Fabianus* was not one of your regular lecture-room philosophers, but one of the old-school type. He used to say, 'We should fight against our emotions and passions by brute force, not by skirmishing. We should upset their line of battle by a

*Papirius Fabianus, a rhetorician and philosopher who was an important influence on Seneca, and most probably his teacher.

home charge, not by inflicting trifling wounds. They must be crushed, not merely scratched.’

Yet errors should be exposed via teaching, not pity. Life is divided into three parts: that which has been, that which is, and that which is to come. Of these three stages, that which we are passing through is brief, that which we are about to pass is uncertain, and that which we have passed is certain. This latter Fortune has lost her rights over, and is beyond the power of another person. This is what busy people lose, because they have no time to look back upon the past, and even if they had, they take no pleasure in remembering what they regret. They are unwilling to turn their minds to the contemplation of ill-spent time, and they shrink from reviewing a course of action whose faults become glaringly apparent when handled a second time, even if they were snatched at when under the spell of immediate gratification. No one, unless their acts have been submitted to the infallible censorship of their own conscience, willingly turns their thoughts back upon the past. A person who has ambitiously desired, haughtily scorned, passionately vanquished, treacherously deceived, greedily snatched, or prodigally wasted much, should fear their memories.

Yet the past is a holy and consecrated part of our time, beyond the reach of all human events, removed

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from the dominion of Fortune, and it cannot be suppressed by desire, fear, or illness. Memories can't be changed or deleted; we have them forever. Our present consists only of single days, and those, too, taken one hour at a time. But all the days of past times appear before us when we summon them, and allow themselves to be examined and lingered over, even if busy people choose not to do this. It is the privilege of a tranquil and peaceful mind to review all the parts of its life. In contrast, the minds of busy people are like animals under the yoke, and cannot bend aside or look back. Consequently, their life passes away into vacancy. Just as there's no point pouring water into a vessel which cannot keep or hold it, so also it doesn't matter how much time you give busy people: they have no place to put it and process it, but must let it leak away through the chinks and holes of their minds. Present time is very short, so much so that to some it seems to be no time at all; it is always in motion, and runs swiftly away. It ceases to exist before it comes, and can no more brook delay than can the stars and the heavens, whose relentless movement never pauses. Busy people, therefore, have only the present moment, and that is so short they cannot grasp it. When they are busy with many things they lose even this.

11.

To sum up, do you want to know how short people's lives are? Just look at how they desire to live longer: broken-down old men beg in their prayers for the addition of a few more years; they pretend to be younger than they are; they delude themselves with their own lies, and are as willing to cheat themselves as if they could cheat Fate at the same time. When at last some weakness reminds them that they are mortal, they die as it were in terror; they are dragged out of this life rather than depart from it. They loudly exclaim that they have been fools and have not lived their lives, and declare that if they only survive this sickness they will spend the rest of their lives at leisure. At such times they reflect how uselessly they have laboured to provide themselves with what they have never enjoyed, and how all their toil has gone for nothing. But those whose life is spent without any engrossing business may well find it ample: no part of it is made over to others, or scattered here and there. No part is entrusted to Fortune, is lost by neglect, is spent in ostentatious giving, or is useless. All of it is, so to speak, invested at good interest. A very small amount of it, therefore, is abundantly sufficient, and so, when his last day arrives, the wise person will not hang back, but will walk with a steady step to meet death.

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12.

Perhaps you want to know who I mean by 'busy people'? Don't believe I am thinking only of those who are hunted out of the courts of justice with dogs at the close of the proceedings, who you see jostled by a crowd of their own clients or contemptuously hustled in visits of ceremony by strangers, who call them away from home to hang about their patron's doors, or who make use of the praetor's sales by auction to acquire infamous gains which some day will prove their own ruin. No, some people become busy with leisure: in their country house or on their couch, in complete solitude. Even though they have retired from all society, they still continue to worry themselves. It would be wrong to say their life is one of leisure, rather they make leisure their business. Would you call a person idle who expends anxious finicking care in the arrangement of their Corinthian bronzes, valuable only because of the mania of a few connoisseurs? And who passes the greater part of their days among plates of rusty metal? Who sits in the palaestra (shame, that our very vices should be foreign) watching boys wrestling? Who distributes their gangs of fettered slaves into pairs according to their age and colour? Who feeds and lavishes care on the latest fashionable athletes?

Are they 'at leisure', those men who pass many hours at the barber's while the growth of the past night is being plucked out by the roots, holding a debate over each hair, while the scattered locks are arranged in order and those which fall back are forced forward on to the forehead? How angry they become if the shaver is a little careless, as though he were shearing a *man*! What a white heat they work themselves into if some of their mane is cut away, if some part of it is ill-arranged, if all their ringlets do not lie in regular order! Which of them would not prefer that the state were overthrown than that their hair should be ruffled? Who does not care more for the appearance of his head than for his health? Who would not prefer ornament to honour? Do you call these men idle, who make a business of the comb and looking-glass? What of those who devote their lives to composing, hearing, and learning songs, who twist their voices, intended by Nature to sound best and simplest when used straightforwardly, through all the turns of futile melodies; whose fingers are always beating time to some music on which they are inwardly meditating; who, when invited to serious and even sad business, may be heard humming an air to themselves?

Such people are not at leisure; they are busy with trifles. As for their banquets, by Hercules, I cannot accept they are unoccupied when I see the anxious

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care with which they set out their plate, how laboriously they arrange the girdles of their waiters' tunics, how breathlessly they watch to see how the cook dishes up the wild boar, with what speed, making sure the slave boys run to perform their duties, how skilfully birds are carved into pieces of the right size, and how painstakingly wretched youths wipe up the spitings of drunken men. By these means men seek credit for taste and grandeur, and their vices follow them so far that they cannot even eat nor drink privately without making a show of it.

Nor should I count those men idle who have themselves been carried here and there in sedans and litters, and who look forward to their regular hour for taking this exercise as though they were not allowed to omit it: men who are reminded by someone else when to bathe, when to swim, when to dine. They reach such a pitch of languid effeminacy as not to be able to find out for themselves whether they are hungry. I have heard one of these luxurious folk – if, indeed, we ought to give the name of luxury to unlearning the life and habits of a man – when he was carried in men's arms out of the bath and placed in his chair, say inquiringly, 'Am I seated?' Do you suppose that such a man as this, who did not know when he was seated, could know whether he was alive, whether he could see, whether he was at leisure? I can hardly say whether I pity him more if he really did not

know or if he pretended not to know this. Such people do really become unconscious of much, but they behave as though they were unconscious of much more. They delight in some failings because they consider them to be proofs of happiness; only a low-class man will know what he is doing. Do you think that playwrights draw largely upon their imaginations in their burlesques on luxury? My God, they omit more than they invent; in our age, inventive in this alone, such a number of incredible vices have been produced that already you are able to reproach the playwrights for not covering them all. To think that there should exist anyone who has so much lost his senses through luxury that they need someone else's opinion as to whether they are sitting or not? This man certainly is not at leisure; you must bestow a different title on him. He is sick, or rather dead. He is only at leisure who feels that he is at leisure. But this creature is only half alive, if he wants someone to tell him what position his body is in. How can such a man possibly be a master of his time?

13.

It would take a long time to describe the various individuals who have wasted their lives over playing at draughts, playing at ball, or toasting their bodies in the sun. People are not at leisure if their pleasures have the feel of business. And no one will doubt that

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those persons are laborious triflers who devote themselves to the study of futile literary questions, of whom there is already a great number in Rome. It used to be a peculiarly Greek disease of the mind to investigate how many rowers Ulysses had, whether the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey* was written first, and whether they were written by the same author – and other matters like this. They neither please your inner consciousness if you keep them to yourself, nor make you seem more learned, indeed only more boring, if you publish them. Already this vain longing to learn what is useless has taken hold of the Romans; the other day I heard somebody saying who was the first Roman general who did this or that. Duillius was the first who won a sea-fight, Curius Dentatus was the first who drove elephants in his triumph, and so on. These stories, though they add nothing to real glory, do nevertheless deal with the great deeds of our countrymen. Such knowledge is not profitable, yet it claims our attention as a fascinating kind of folly. I will even pardon those who want to know who was the first Roman to board a ship. It was Claudius, who for this reason was surnamed Caudex, because any piece of carpentry formed of many planks was called *caudex* by the ancient Romans, for which reason public records are called *codices*, and by old custom the ships which ply on the Tiber with provisions are called *codicariae*. It is also fine to tell how Valerius Corvinus was the

first to conquer Messana, and so the first of his family of the Valerii to transfer the name of the captured city to his own, so he was called Messana, and how the people gradually corrupted the pronunciation and called him Messalla. Someone else may be interested in the fact that Lucius Sulla was the first to let lions loose in the circus, they having been previously exhibited in chains, when hurlers of spears were sent by King Bocchus to kill them.

Such things it may be permitted to be curious about. But can it serve any useful purpose to know that Pompey was the first to exhibit eighteen elephants in the circus, who were matched in a show battle with some prisoners? The leading man in the state, and one who, according to tradition, was noted among the ancient leaders of the state for his transcendent goodness of heart, thought it would make for an interesting show to kill men in a new way. Do they fight to the death? That is not cruel enough. Are they torn to pieces? That is not cruel enough. Let them be crushed flat by animals of enormous bulk. It would be much better that such a thing should be forgotten, for fear that some potentate might hear of it and envy its refined barbarity. Oh, how does excessive prosperity blind our intellects! At the moment at which he was casting so many troops of wretches to be trampled on by outlandish beasts, when he was proclaiming war between such different creatures, when

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he was shedding so much blood before the eyes of the Roman people, whose blood he himself was soon to shed even more freely, he thought himself the master of the whole world. Yet afterwards, deceived by the treachery of the Alexandrians, Pompey had to offer himself to the dagger of the vilest of slaves, and then at last discovered what an empty boast was his surname of 'The Great'.

But to return to the point from which I have digressed, I will prove that even on this very subject some people expend useless pains. The same author tells us that Metellus, when he triumphed after having conquered the Carthaginians in Sicily, was the only Roman who ever had a hundred-and-twenty captured elephants leading his chariot. And that Sulla was the last Roman who extended the pomoerium* which it was not the custom of the ancients to extend after conquest of provincial, but only of Italian territory. Is it more useful to know this, than to know that the Mount Aventine, according to him, is outside the pomoerium, for one of two reasons: either because it was there that the plebeians seceded; or because when Remus took his auspices on that place the birds which he saw were not propitious – and many other stories like this which are either actual falsehoods or much the same as falsehoods? Because even if you

*The ancient boundary of Rome.

allow that these authors spoke in good faith, if pledged they only wrote the truth, still whose mistakes will be made fewer by such stories? Whose passions will be restrained? Who will they make more brave, more just, or more gentlemanly? My friend Fabianus used to say that it was perhaps better not to apply oneself to any studies at all than to become interested in this kind.

14.

The only people who are really at leisure are those who devote themselves to philosophy. They alone really live. For they do not merely enjoy their own lifetime, but they annex every century to their own; all the years which have passed before them belong to them. Unless we are the most ungrateful creatures in the world, we shall regard these noblest of men, the founders of divine schools of thought, as having been born for us, and having prepared life for us. We are led by the labour of others to behold most beautiful things which have been brought out of darkness into light. We are not shut out from any period, we can make our way into every subject, and if only we can summon up sufficient strength of mind to overstep the narrow limit of human weakness, we have a vast extent of time in which to enjoy ourselves. We may argue with Socrates, doubt with Carneades, find

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tranquillity with Epicurus, overcome human nature with the Stoics, go beyond it with the Cynics.

Since Nature allows us to commune with every age, why do we not abstract ourselves from our own petty fleeting span of time, and give ourselves up with our whole mind to what is vast, what is eternal, what we share with better humans than ourselves? Those who gad about in a round of calls, who worry themselves and others, having indulged their madness to the full and crossed every patron's threshold daily, leaving no open door unentered, after they have hawked about their interested greetings in houses far apart . . . and anyway, how few people are they able to see out of so vast a city, filled with so many different wants and desires? How many will be moved by sloth, self-indulgence, or rudeness to deny them admittance? How many, after they have long plagued them, will run past them with feigned hurry? How many will avoid coming out through their entrance hall with its crowds of clients, and will escape by some concealed backdoor, as though it were not ruder to deceive their visitor than to deny him admittance! How many, half asleep and stupid with last night's party, can hardly be brought to return the greeting of the wretched man who has broken his own rest in order to wait on that of another, even after his name has been whispered to them for the thousandth time, save by a most offensive yawn of his half-opened lips.

We may truly say people are pursuing the true path of duty who wish every day to consort on the most familiar terms with Zeno, Pythagoras, Democritus, and the rest of those high priests of virtue, with Aristotle and with Theophrastus. None of these great philosophers will be 'engaged', none will fail to send you away after visiting them in a happier frame of mind and on better terms with yourself, and none of them will let you leave them empty handed. Yet their society may be enjoyed by all people, and by night as well as by day.

15.

None of these philosophers will force you to die, but all of them will teach you how to die. None of these will waste your time, but will add his own to it. The talk of these men is not dangerous, their friendship will not lead you to the scaffold, their society will not ruin you in expenses. You may take from them whatever you will; they will not prevent your taking the deepest draughts of their wisdom that you please. What blessedness, what a fair old age awaits the person who takes these for his patrons! They will have friends with whom to discuss all matters, great and small, to get daily advice that provides truth without insult, praise without flattery, and according to whose likeness they may model their own character.

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We are wont to say that we are not able to choose who our parents should be, but that they were assigned to us by chance. Yet we may be born just as we please, because here are several families of the noblest intellects: choose which you would like to belong to. By your adoption you will not receive their name only, but also their property, which is not intended to be guarded in a mean and miserly spirit; the more people it is divided amongst the larger it becomes. These will open to you the path which leads to eternity, and raise you to a height from where none will cast you down. By this means alone can you prolong your mortal life, even turn it into an immortal one. High office, monuments, all that ambition records in decrees or piles up in stone, soon passes away; the passing of time casts down and ruins everything. But those things on which philosophy has set its seal are beyond the reach of injury: no age will discard them or lessen their force, and each succeeding century will add somewhat to the respect in which they are held. For we look upon what is near us with jealous eyes, but admire what is further off with less prejudice. The wise person's life, therefore, includes much: they are not hedged in by the same limits which confine others. They are exempt from the laws by which humankind is governed. All ages serve them like a god. If any time is past, they recall it by their

memory; if it is present, they use it; if it be future, they anticipate it. Their life is a long one because they concentrate all times into it.

16.

Those people lead the shortest and unhappiest lives who forget the past, neglect the present, and dread the future: when they reach the end of it the poor wretches learn too late that they were busy all the while that they were doing nothing. Just because they sometimes wish for death doesn't mean that their lives are long: their folly torments them with vague passions which lead them into the very things of which they are afraid. They often wish for death because they live in fear. Neither is it, as you might think, a proof of the length of their lives that they often find the days long, that they often complain how slowly the hours pass until the appointed time arrives for dinner. Because whenever they are left without their usual business, they fret helplessly in their idleness, and don't know how to arrange or to spin it out. They commit themselves to some business, and all the intervening time is irksome to them. They would like to skip over it, just as they wish to skip over the intervening days before a gladiatorial contest or some other time appointed for a public spectacle or private indulgence; all postponement of what

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they wish for is grievous to them. Yet the very time which they enjoy is brief and soon past, and is made much briefer by their own fault. They run from one pleasure to another, and are not able to devote themselves consistently to one passion; their days are not long, but odious to them. On the other hand, how short do they find the nights which they spend with courtesans or over wine? The poets are bad in the way they encourage the errors of people by their myths, for instance declaring that Jupiter, to gratify his voluptuous desires, doubled the length of the night. Is it not adding fuel to our vices to name the gods as their authors, and to offer our additions free scope by giving them a god for a model? How can the nights which people pay so dearly for, not seem very short to them? They lose the day in looking forward to the night, and lose the night through fear of the dawn.

17.

Such people's very pleasures are restless and disturbed by various alarms, and at the most joyous moment of all there rises the anxious thought: 'How long will this last?' This frame of mind has led kings to weep over their power. They have not been as delighted at the grandeur of their position as they have been terrified by the end to which it must someday come. That most arrogant Persian king, Xerxes,

when his army stretched over vast plains and could not be counted but only measured, burst into tears at the thought that in less than a hundred years none of all those warriors would be alive. Yet their death was brought upon them by the very man who wept over it, who was about to destroy some of them by sea, some on land, some in battle, and some in flight, and who would in a very short space of time end the life of those about whose hundredth year he showed such concern.

But why should we be surprised at the joys of such leaders being mixed with fear? Their joys do not rest upon any solid grounds, but are disturbed by the same emptiness from which they spring. Even the joys by which they elevate themselves and raise themselves above their fellows are of a mixed character. All the greatest blessings are enjoyed with fear, and no thing is so untrustworthy as extreme wealth. We require fresh strokes of good fortune to enable us to keep that which we are enjoying, and even the prayers which are answered require fresh prayers. Everything for which we are dependent on chance is uncertain. The higher something rises, the more opportunities it has of falling. Moreover, no one takes any pleasure in what is about to fall into ruin. Very miserable, therefore, as well as very short must be the lives of those who work very hard to gain what they must work even harder to keep. They obtain what they wish with

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infinite labour, and they hold what they have obtained with fear and trembling. Meanwhile they take no account of time, of which they will never have a fresh and larger supply. They substitute new occupations for old ones, one hope leads to another, one ambition to another. They do not seek for an end to their sadness, but just change the reason. Do our own wishes for promotion and offices trouble us? Actually, those of others occupy more of our time. We give up canvassing for ourselves and campaign for others. We stop bothering to bring something to court, and instead become a juror. We grow old in the salaried management of other people's property, while our own takes second place. Gaius Marius was discharged from military service only to be made consul many times. Quintius Cincinnatus was eager to reach the end of his dictatorship, but was called back from his plough a second time to serve. Scipio marched against the Carthaginians before he was old enough for so great an undertaking. After he had conquered Hannibal, conquered Antiochus, been the glory of his own consulship and the surety for that of his brother, he might have been set on the same pedestal with Jupiter. But civil factions vexed the saviour of the state, and the one who as a young man disdained to receive divine honours took pride as an old man in obstinately remaining in exile. There is never a shortage of causes of anxiety, either pleasurable or painful.

Our life will be pushed along from one business to another. Leisure will always be wished for, and never enjoyed.

18.

Therefore, my dearest Paulinus, tear yourself away from the common herd, and since you have seen more rough weather than one would think from your age, take yourself off to a more peaceful haven. Reflect what waves you have sailed through, what storms you have endured in private life, and brought upon yourself in public. Your courage has been sufficiently displayed by many difficult and tiring proofs; test it now with leisure. The greater, certainly the better part of your life, has been given to your country; now give yourself some time. I don't mean practising a dull or lazy sloth, or drowning all your fiery spirit in the pleasures which are dear to the herd. That is not rest. You can find greater projects even than the ones you have so manfully carried out, on which you can employ yourself in retirement and security. You manage the revenues of the entire world as unselfishly as though they belonged to another, as laboriously as if they were your own, as scrupulously as though they belonged to the public. You win love in an office in which it is hard to avoid incurring hatred. Yet believe me, it is better to understand your own mind than to

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understand the corn-market. Take away that keen intellect of yours, so well capable of grappling with the greatest subjects, from a post which may be dignified, but which is hardly fitted to render life happy, and reflect that you did not study from childhood all the branches of a liberal education merely in order that many thousand tons of corn might safely be entrusted to your charge. You have given us promise of something greater and nobler than this. There will never be any want of strict economists or of laborious workers. Slow-going beasts of burden are better suited for carrying loads than well-bred horses, whose generous swiftness no one would encumber with a heavy pack. Think, moreover, how full of risk is the great task which you have undertaken: you have to deal with the human stomach. A hungry people will not endure reason, will not be appeased by justice, and will not listen to any prayers.

Only just a few days ago, when Gaius Caesar perished, grieving (if those in the other world can feel grief) that the Roman people would not die with him, there was said to be only enough corn for seven or eight days' consumption. While he was making bridges with ships and playing with the resources of the empire, the need of provisions, the worst evil that can befall even a besieged city, was at hand. His imitation of a crazy, outlandish, and conceited king very

nearly ended in ruin, famine, and the general revolution which follows famine. What must then have been the feelings of those who had the charge of supplying the city with corn, who were in danger of stoning, of fire and sword, of Gaius himself? With consummate art they concealed the vast internal evil by which the state was menaced, and were quite right in so doing. Because some diseases must be cured without the patient's knowledge; many have died through discovering what was the matter with them.

19.

Take yourself, then, to these quieter, safer, larger fields of action. Do you think that there can be any comparison between seeing that corn is deposited in the public granary without being stolen by the fraud or spoilt by the carelessness of the importer, that it does not suffer from damp or overheating, and that it measures and weighs as much as it should – and beginning the study of sacred and divine knowledge, which will teach you of what elements the gods are formed, what are their pleasures, their position, their form? To what fate lies in store for your soul? Where will Nature take us when we leave our bodies? What is the principle that holds all the heaviest particles of our universe in the middle, suspends the lighter ones above, puts fire highest of all, and causes the stars to

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rise in their courses, with many other matters, full of marvels? Will you still grovel on earth when you can turn your mind's eye on these themes? No! While your blood still flows swiftly, before your knees grow feeble, you ought to take the better path. In this course of life there await you many good things, such as love and practice of the virtues, leaving behind the passions, knowledge of how to live and die, and deep calm. The condition of all busy people is unhappiness, but most unhappy of all are those who do not even have time for themselves, but have to regulate their rest by another person's sleep, their walk by another person's pace, and whose very love and hate, the freest things in the world, are at another's bidding. If such people wish to know how short their lives are, let them think on how small a fraction of them is their own.

20.

When, therefore, you see a man often wear the purple robes of office, and hear his name often repeated in the forum, do not envy him; he gains these things by losing so much of his life. Men throw away all their years in order to have one year named after them as consul. Some lose their lives during the early part of the struggle, and never reach the height to which they aspired. Some, after having submitted to a

thousand indignities in order to reach the crowning dignity, have the miserable realization that the only result of their efforts will be the inscription on their tombstone. Some, while trying to defy old age and going after new aspirations, as if they were still young, have failed from sheer weakness before such great and presumptuous enterprises. What a shameful ending it is, when a man's breath deserts him in a court of justice; he is too old to be still striving to gain the sympathies of an ignorant audience for some obscure litigant. It is a sad thing to perish in the midst of one's business, having used up all one's energy for life on work; shameful, too, to die in the act of receiving payments, amid the laughter of one's long-expectant heir. I cannot pass over an instance which occurs to me: Turannius was an old man of the most painstaking exactitude, who after entering upon his ninetieth year, when he had by Gaius Caesar's own act been relieved of his duties as collector of the revenue, ordered himself to be laid out on his bed and mourned for as though he were dead. The whole house mourned for the enforced leisure of its old master, and did not stop its mourning until his work was restored to him. Can people really find pleasure in dying while at work? Yet many think like this; they retain their wish for labour longer than their capacity for it, and fight against their bodily weakness. They think old age an evil for no other reason than because

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it lays them on the shelf. The law does not enrol a soldier after his fiftieth year, or require a senator's attendance after his sixtieth. But men have more difficulty in obtaining their *own* consent to a life of leisure than that of the law. Meanwhile, they continue to plunder and be plundered, each disturbing each other's repose. Their lives remain without profit, without pleasure, without any intellectual progress. None of them think of death, and all keep entertaining their ambitions. Some even arrange things which lie beyond their own lives, such as huge tombs, the dedication of public works, exhibitions to be given at their funeral pyre, and ostentatious processions. But by God, the funerals of such men ought to be conducted by the light of torches and wax tapers, as though they had lived just a few days.

