

CONTENTS

Introduction vii

On the Shortness of Life i

Moral Epistles 1 and 49 (excerpts) 137

Notes 157

ON THE SHORTNESS OF LIFE

[I] Most of humankind, Paulinus,¹ complains about the spitefulness of Nature, on grounds that we're born for a short life span and that these moments of time that have been given to us dart away so quickly, so swiftly, that only a few escape this pattern: life deserts us when we're just getting ready for life. It's not only the crowd and the thoughtless mob that's grieved by this universal ill (as they think it to be); it draws, as well, the impassioned laments of leaders. Hence, one hears that well-known saying of the greatest of doctors:² "Life is short, but art is long." Or the complaint, so unbecoming a philosopher, voiced by Aristotle as he quarreled with

DE BREVITATE VITAE

sapienti viro lis: “aetatis illam animalibus tantum indulgisse, ut quina aut dena saecula educerent, homini in tam multa ac magna genito tanto citeriorem terminum stare.” Non exiguum temporis habemus, sed multum perdidimus. Satis longa vita et in maximarum rerum consummationem large data est, si tota bene collocaretur; sed ubi per luxum ac negligentiam diffluit, ubi nulli bonae rei impenditur, ultima demum necessitate cogente, quam ire non intelleximus transisse sentimus. Ita est: non accipimus brevem vitam sed fecimus, nec inopes eius sed prodigi sumus. Sicut amplae et regiae opes, ubi ad malum dominum pervenerunt, momento dissipantur, at quamvis modicae, si bono custodi traditae sunt, usu crescunt:

ON THE SHORTNESS OF LIFE

Nature: “She lavished so much life span on the animals that they can stretch out their existence for five or ten ages, but set such a quicker endpoint for humankind, a race born for so many great endeavors.”³

In fact, our time is not short, but we squander much of it. Life’s long enough and generously allotted to allow us to achieve great things, if it were well spent; but when it seeps away through pleasure-seeking and lack of awareness, when it is dispensed for no good thing, then, as the final necessity bears down, we realize that the life we didn’t feel passing has already gone past. It’s like this: life’s not short when we get it, but we *make* it so; we’re not poor in life but wasteful of it. Just as plentiful and princely wealth can be scattered in a moment if it comes to a wicked master, while it grows when deployed by a good caretaker, so our life span

DE BREVITATE VITAE

ita aetas nostra bene disponenti multum patet.

II. Quid de rerum natura querimur? Illa se benigne gessit: vita, si uti scias, longa est. Alium insatiabilis tenet avaritia; alium in supervacuis laboribus operosa sedulitas; alius vino madet, alius inertia torpet; alium defatigat ex alienis iudiciis suspensa semper ambitio, alium mercandi praeceps cupiditas circa omnis terras, omnia maria spe lucri ducit; quosdam torquet cupido militiae numquam non aut alienis periculis intentos aut suis anxios; sunt quos ingratus superiorum cultus voluntaria servitute consumat; multos aut affectatio alienae formae aut suae querella detinuit; plerosque nihil certum sequentis vaga et inconstans et sibi displicens levitas per nova consilia iactavit; quibusdam nihil quo cursum derigant

ON THE SHORTNESS OF LIFE

has ample extent for those who manage it well.

[2] Why do we complain about Nature? She's full of kindness. Life is long if you know how to make use of it. But insatiable greed holds some in its grip; a toilsome devotion to useless endeavors, others; this one is sodden with wine, that one grows sluggish with idleness; ambition, always dependent on outside opinions, exhausts this one, while that one is led through all lands and seas by restless zeal for trade and hope of profit. Some are tormented by a desire for soldiering, always intent on injuries to others or worried over those to themselves; some are made slaves, of their own will, through unrequited attendance on higher-ups. Then there's the crowd that pursues no fixed goal—their restless, shifting, discontented shallowness tosses them about from

DE BREVITATE VITAE

placet, sed marcentis oscitantisque fata deprendunt, adeo ut quod apud maximum poetarum more oraculi dictum est verum esse non dubitem: “Exigua pars est vitae qua vivimus.” Ceterum quidem omne spatium non vita sed tempus est. Urgent et circumstant vitia undique nec resurgere aut in dispectum veri attollere oculos sinunt. Et immersos et in cupiditatem infixos premunt, numquam illis recurrere ad se licet. Si quando aliqua fortuito quies contigit, velut profundo mari, in quo post ventum quoque volutatio est, fluctuantur nec umquam illis a cupiditatibus suis otium stat. De istis me putas dicere, quorum in confesso mala sunt? Aspice illos ad quorum felicitatem concurritur: bonis suis effocantur. Quam

ON THE SHORTNESS OF LIFE

one plan to the next—and others who aren't content with *any* goal they might have pursued, who meet their end slouching and yawning, confirming for me that what the greatest of poets has said, in the manner of an oracle, is true: "It's only a sliver of life that we actually *live*."⁴ All the rest of the span is not life but only time.

Vices surround and oppress us everywhere. They prevent us from lifting our eyes for a view of the truth, but rather push them downward and keep them fixed on our desires. People are never allowed to return to their true selves. If a chance space of calm comes upon them, they're like the deep sea, which rolls with swells after a gale; they are still rolled about and never find any release from their desires. Do you think I'm speaking of *those*, who have undeniable faults? Just look at *these*, whose good

DE BREVITATE VITAE

multis divitiae graves sunt! Quam multorum eloquentia et cotidiana ostentandi ingenii sollicitatio sanguinem educit! Quam multi continuis voluptatibus pallent! Quam multis nihil liberi relinquit circumfusus clientium populus! Omnis denique istos ab infimis usque ad summos pererra: hic advocat, hic adest, ille periclitatur, ille defendit, ille iudicat, nemo se sibi vindicat, alius in alium consumitur. Interroga de istis quorum nomina ediscuntur, his illos dinosci videbis notis: ille illius cultor est, hic illius;

ON THE SHORTNESS OF LIFE

fortune draws others in throngs;⁵ they're suffocated by their own successes. How many have found wealth a burden! How many have had their blood drained on account of their eloquence and their obsession with showing off talent each and every day! How many grow pale through constant pursuit of pleasure! How many have no freedom left, when a crowd of dependents surrounds them? Look them over, all of them, from those at the bottom right up to the top. One hires a lawyer, another takes the case, a third stands at the dock, a fourth mounts the defense, a fifth acts as judge, yet none of them sue to reclaim *themselves*; each one is used up for another's sake.

Go ahead and ask about those whose names are on everyone's lips. You'll see how they differ one from another: The first plays up to the second, the second to the third;

DE BREVITATE VITAE

suus nemo est. Deinde dementissima quorundam indignatio est: queruntur de superiorum fastidio, quod ipsis adire volentibus non vacaverint! Audet quisquam de alterius superbia queri, qui sibi ipse numquam vacat? Ille tamen te, quisquis es, insolenti quidem vultu sed aliquando respexit, ille aures suas ad tua verba demisit, ille te ad latus suum recepit: tu non inspicere te umquam, non audire dignatus es. Non est itaque quod ista officia cuiquam imputes, quoniam quidem, cum illa faceres, non esse cum alio volebas, sed tecum esse non poteras.

III. Omnia licet quae umquam ingenia fulserunt in hoc unum consentiant, numquam

ON THE SHORTNESS OF LIFE

none belong to themselves. Then think of the outrage, insane though it is, of those who complain about the arrogance of higher-ups, saying they don't make time for those who desire a meeting. Does anyone dare to complain about the arrogance of another, while never making time for him- or herself? Here's one who deigns to notice you (whoever you are) now and then, though with haughty expression; who opens his ears to your words and who admits you to his presence; yet you didn't think it worth your while to look at or hear *yourself*. You've got no right to expect anyone to pay you back for those services; when you offered them, it was not from a wish to be with someone else but an inability to be with yourself.

[3] Though all the bright spirits that ever blazed concur on this point, still they can

DE BREVITATE VITAE

satis hanc humanarum mentium caliginem mirabuntur: praedia sua occupari a nullo patiuntur et, si exigua contentio est de modo finium, ad lapides et arma discurrunt; in vitam suam incedere alios sinunt, immo vero ipsi etiam possessores eius futuros inducunt; nemo invenitur qui pecuniam suam dividere velit, vitam unusquisque quam multis distribuit! Adstricti sunt in continendo patrimonio, simul ad iacturam temporis ventum est, profusissimi in eo cuius unius honesta avaritia est. Libet itaque ex seniorum turba comprehendere aliquem: “Pervenisse te ad ultimum aetatis humanae videmus, centesimus tibi vel supra premitur annus: agedum, ad computationem aetatem tuam revoca. Duc

ON THE SHORTNESS OF LIFE

never be astonished enough at the fog that besets human minds. No one lets their property get seized; if even a tiny dispute arises over boundaries, people dash for stones and weapons. Yet they allow others to invade their very life, or indeed they themselves install those who will carve off swaths of its territory. You'll find no one who voluntarily shares his money, yet to how many do we each give shares of our life! People are stingy when it comes to conserving estates, but the moment it comes to expenditure of *time*, the one thing for which it's honorable to be greedy, they're spendthrifts.

Let's get hold of someone out of the multitude of the elderly and say: "We see that you've arrived at that final stage of human life; you're bearing down on your hundredth year or more. Come then, summon

DE BREVITATE VITAE

quantum ex isto tempore creditor, quantum amica, quantum rex, quantum cliens abstulerit, quantum lis uxoria, quantum servorum coercitio, quantum officiosa per urbem discursatio; adice morbos quos manu fecimus, adice quod et sine usu iacuit: videbis te pauciores annos habere quam numeras. Repete memoria tecum quando certus consilii fueris, quotus quisque dies ut destinaveras recesserit, quando tibi usus tui fuerit, quando in statu suo vultus, quando animus intrepidus, quid tibi in tam longo aevo facti operis sit, quam multi vitam tuam diripuerint te non sentiente quid perderes, quantum vanus dolor, stulta laetitia, avida cupiditas,

ON THE SHORTNESS OF LIFE

your life span for an accounting. Reckon up how much of that time a creditor, mistress, ruler, or client stole away; how much an argument with your wife or the scolding of your slaves, how much your dashing about town on needful tasks; then add the illnesses we bring on ourselves, add the time spent doing nothing; you'll see that your number of years does not measure up to your original count.

“Search back in your memory for the time when your resolve was firm—how few days ended up as you'd planned!—when you had full control of yourself; when your face wore its natural expression; when your mind felt no fear. Think of what you can claim to have done in so long a life; how many people have taken chunks of your life while you didn't notice what you were losing; how much was lost to empty grief, to

DE BREVITATE VITAE

blanda conversatio abstulerit, quam exiguum tibi de tuo relictum sit: intelleges te immaturum mori.” Quid ergo est in causa? Tamquam semper victuri vivitis, numquam vobis fragilitas vestra succurrit, non observatis quantum iam temporis transierit; velut ex pleno et abundanti perditis, cum interim fortasse ille ipse qui alicui vel homini vel rei donatur dies ultimus sit. Omnia tamquam mortales timetis, omnia tamquam immortales concupiscitis. Audies plerosque dicentes: “A quinquagesimo anno in otium secedam, sexagesimus me annus ab officiis dimittet.” Et quem tandem longioris vitae praedem accipis? Quis ista sicut disponis ire patietur? Non pudet te reliquias vitae tibi reservare et id

ON THE SHORTNESS OF LIFE

foolish elation, to greedy desire, to fawning socializing; how little a part of your time you still own; then you'll understand that you're in fact dying too soon."

How to explain it? You live as though you'll be alive forever, not taking account of your human fragility; you don't notice how much time has gone by; you squander it as though from a full and heaping store, while that very day that's spent on some person or thing might be your last one. Your fears about all things are those of mortals; your desires of all things, those of immortals. One hears a lot of people saying, "I'll cut back and take things easy when I'm fifty, and my sixtieth year will release me from duties." And what guarantee of a longer life have you gotten? Who will permit those things to proceed as you've planned them? Aren't you ashamed to set aside the

DE BREVITATE VITAE

solum tempus bonae menti destinare quod in nullam rem conferri possit? Quam serum est tunc vivere incipere cum desinendum est! Quae tam stulta mortalitatis oblivio in quinquagesimum et sexagesimum annum differre sana consilia et inde velle vitam inchoare quo pauci perduxerunt!

IV. Potentissimis et in altum sublatis hominibus excidere voces videbis quibus otium optent, laudent, omnibus bonis suis praeferant. Cupiunt interim ex illo fastigio suo, si tuto liceat, descendere; nam ut nihil extra lacesat aut quatiat, in se ipsa fortuna ruit. Diuus Augustus, cui dii plura quam ulli

ON THE SHORTNESS OF LIFE

remnants of life for yourself and devote to higher thought only that portion of time that can't be put to any business matter? How late to begin to live, at the point that life must be left behind! How foolish to ignore mortality and put off sound pursuits⁶ to one's fiftieth or sixtieth year and to want to start life at a point to which few have attained!

[4] You'll notice that even the most powerful people, those who've ascended to the heights, drop hints about the repose they long for, praise, or place above all other priorities. They often want to climb down from that high ledge they're on, if it can be done safely; for even though no external force disturbs or shakes it, Fortune collapses upon itself, by itself.

The deified Augustus,⁷ to whom the gods gave more than to anyone else, never stopped

DE BREVITATE VITAE

praestiterunt, non desiit quietem sibi precari et vacationem a re publica petere; omnis eius sermo ad hoc semper revolutus est, ut speraret otium: hoc labores suos, etiam si falso, dulci tamen oblectabat solacio, aliquando se victurum sibi. In quadam ad senatum missa epistula, cum requiem suam non vacuam fore dignitatis nec a priore gloria discrepantem pollicitus esset, haec verba inveni: “Sed ista fieri speciosius quam promitti possunt. Me tamen cupido temporis optatissimi mihi provexit, ut quoniam rerum laetitia moratur adhuc, praeciperem aliquid voluptatis ex verborum dulcedine.” Tanta visa est res otium, ut illam, quia usu non poterat, cogitatione praesumeret. Qui

ON THE SHORTNESS OF LIFE

praying for rest and seeking a respite from public affairs. All his conversations kept coming back to his desire for rest; it was by this consolation, sweet even if false—the thought that he’d someday live for himself—that he relieved his toils. I have found the following words in a certain letter he sent to the Senate,⁸ claiming that a respite would not be without dignity nor in conflict with the glory he’d accrued up to that point: “But these matters are more impressive in the execution than the prospect. In any case my desire for that time I most hope for⁹ has reached the point that since the joy of attaining the thing itself is still lagging, I’m seeking to get some advance enjoyment from the sweetness of words.” That’s how great a thing leisure seemed, so great that one who could not yet obtain its use could get a taste of it in his thoughts. The man

DE BREVITATE VITAE

omnia videbat ex se uno pendentia, qui hominibus gentibusque fortunam dabat, illum diem laetissimus cogitabat quo magnitudinem suam exueret. Expertus erat quantum illa bona per omnis terras fulgentia sudoris exprimerent, quantum occultarum sollicitudinum tegerent: cum civibus primum, deinde cum collegis, novissime cum affinibus coactus armis decernere mari teraque sanguinem fudit. Per Macedoniam, Siciliam, Aegyptum, Syriam Asiamque et omnis prope oras bello circumactus Romana caede lassos exercitus ad externa bella convertit. Dum Alpes pacat immixtosque mediae paci et imperio hostes perdomat,

ON THE SHORTNESS OF LIFE

who saw everything relying on his sole person, who saw to the success of individuals and nations, regarded with greatest delight that day on which he might set aside his own greatness. He had learned how much sweat was wrung from him by those blessings that shone out on every land, how many hidden worries they concealed. He'd been forced to wage war first with fellow citizens, then with his colleagues, and finally with in-laws;¹⁰ he'd spilled blood by land and by sea. Compelled to march through Macedonia, Sicily, Egypt, Syria, Asia Minor, and nearly every coast, he unleashed the armed forces, weary of Roman slaughter, on foreign wars. While he was subduing the Alps and enemies nestled in amid the empire and at peace, while he was pushing our boundaries past the Danube and Rhine and Euphrates, here in Rome

DE BREVI TATE VITAE

dum ultra Rhenum et Euphraten et Danuvium terminos movet, in ipsa urbe Murenae, Caepionis Lepidi, Egnati, aliorum in eum mucrones acuebantur. Nondum horum effugerat insidias: filia et tot nobiles iuvenes adulterio velut sacramento adacti iam infractam aetatem territabant Iullusque et iterum timenda cum Antonio mulier. Haec ulcera cum ipsis membris absciderat: alia subnascebantur; velut grave multo sanguine corpus parte semper aliqua rumpebatur. Itaque otium optabat, in huius spe et cogitatione labores eius residebant, hoc votum erat eius qui voti compotes facere poterat.

V. M. Cicero inter Catilinas, Clodios iactatus Pompeiosque et Crassos, partim manifestos

ON THE SHORTNESS OF LIFE

itself, the blades of Murena, Caepio, Lepidus, Egnatius, and others were whetted against him.¹¹ And he was not yet free of those conspiracies when his daughter and so many highborn youths, confederate in adultery as though in a sacred vow, brought constant alarm to his now broken years, along with Iullus and yet another woman who, when paired with an Antony, had to be feared.¹² As soon as he'd excised these sores by cutting off his very limbs, others opened up in their place; just as in a body sodden with too much blood, there was always a hemorrhage in one place or another. And so he longed for a peaceful disengagement; his toils found relief in the hope and contemplation of this. This was the wish of one who could make others' wishes come true.

[5] Marcus Cicero, beset by Catilines and Clodiuses, Pompeys and Crassuses—some,

DE BREVITATE VITAE

inimicos, partim dubios amicos, dum fluctuatur cum re publica et illam pessum euntem tenet, novissime abductus, nec secundis rebus quietus nec adversarum patiens, quotiens illum ipsum consulatum suum non sine causa sed sine fine laudatum detestatur! Quam flebiles voces exprimit in quadam ad Atticum epistula iam victo patre Pompeio, adhuc filio in Hispania fracta arma refovente! “Quid agam,” inquit, “hic, quaeris? Moror in Tusculano meo semiliber.” Alia deinceps adicit, quibus et priorem aetatem complorat et de praesenti queritur et de futura desperat. Semiliberum se dixit Cicero: at me hercules numquam sapiens in tam humile nomen procedet, numquam semiliber erit, integrae semper libertatis et solidae,

ON THE SHORTNESS OF LIFE

open enemies; others, treacherous friends—while being tossed on rough seas along with the republic, and keeping the state from going under, was at last swept away.¹³ He was neither at peace in good times nor able to bear up when things went against him. How often did he curse that very consulship that he'd once praised (not without cause but without cease)! How many woe-ful expressions he used in a certain letter to Atticus, when Pompey the father was already beaten but Pompey the son was still reviving his broken strength in Spain.¹⁴ "What am I to do here, you ask?" he writes. "I'm detained on my Tusculan estate, half-free." He adds other thoughts, lamenting his earlier life, complaining about his present one, despairing of the one to come. Cicero called himself "half-free;" but I swear, a sage will never aspire to such a lowly term, and

DE BREVITATE VITAE

solutus et sui iuris et altior ceteris. Quid enim supra eum potest esse qui supra fortunam est?

VI. Livius Drusus, vir acer et vehemens, cum leges novas et mala Gracchana movisset stipatus ingenti totius Italiae coetu, exitum rerum non pervidens, quas nec agere licebat nec iam liberum erat semel incohas relinquare, execratus inquietam a primordiis vitam dicitur dixisse: uni sibi ne puero quidem umquam ferias contigisse. Ausus est enim et pupillus adhuc et praetextatus iudicibus reos commendare et gratiam suam foro interponere tam efficaciter quidem, ut quaedam iudicia constet ab illo

ON THE SHORTNESS OF LIFE

indeed will never be “half-free,” but will always be free in a whole and pure sense, unconstrained, master of himself, higher than everything else.

[6] Livius Drusus¹⁵ was a keen and industrious man. Once, when he had moved radical legislation and stirred up the ills of the days of the Gracchi,¹⁶ with a huge throng from all of Italy surrounding him, seeing no good end for the undertakings that could neither be brought to fulfillment nor abandoned once set in motion, calling down curses on a life that had been busy from its outset, he is said to have said, “I alone have never seen a day of rest, even in childhood.” When still a young lad, not yet in an adult’s toga, he had the courage to plead for defendants in front of judges and exert influence in the courts, so effectively that he beat the odds by winning some verdicts. Such a

DE BREVITATE VITAE

rapta. Quo non erumperet tam immatura ambitio? Scires in malum ingens et privatum et publicum evasuram praecoquem audaciam. Sero itaque querebatur nullas sibi ferias contigisse a puero seditiosus et foro gravis. Disputatur an ipse sibi manus attulerit; subito enim vulnere per inguen accepto collapsus est, aliquo dubitante an mors eius voluntaria esset, nullo an tempestiva. Super-
vacuum est commemorare plures qui, cum aliis felicissimi viderentur, ipsi in se verum testimonium dixerunt perosi omnem actum annorum suorum; sed his querellis nec alios mutaverunt nec se ipsos: nam cum verba