

LUCRETIUS

ON THE NATURE
OF THINGS

De rerum natura



EDITED AND TRANSLATED BY
Anthony M. Esolen

BOOK ONE



Mother of Romans, delight of gods and men,
Sweet Venus, who under the wheeling signs of heaven
Rouse the ship-shouldering sea and the fruitful earth
And make them teem—for through you all that breathe
Are begotten, and rise to see the light of the sun;
From you, goddess, the winds flee, from you and your coming
Flee the storms of heaven; for you the artful earth
Sends up sweet flowers, for you the ocean laughs
And the calm skies shimmer in a bath of light.
And now, when the gates are wide for spring and its splendor 10
And the west wind, fostering life, blows strong and free,
Pricked in their hearts by your power, the birds of the air
Give the first sign, goddess, of you and your entering;
Then through the fertile fields the love-wild beasts
Frolic, and swim the rapids (so seized with your charm
They eagerly follow wherever you may lead);
Yes, across seas and mountains and hungering rivers
And the leaf-springing homes of the birds and the greening fields,
Into all hearts you strike your lure of love
That by desire they propagate their kinds. 20
And since it is you alone who govern the birth
And growth of things, since nothing without you
Can be glad or lovely or rise to the shores of light,
I ask you to befriend me as I try
To pen these verses *On the Nature of Things*
For my friend Memmius, whom you, goddess, have ever
Caused to excel, accomplished in all things.
All the more, goddess, grant them lasting grace!

30 In the meantime let the savage works of war
 Rest easy, slumbering over land and sea.
 For you alone can bless us mortal men
 With quiet peace; Mars, potent of arms, holds sway
 In battle, but surrenders at your bosom,
 Vanquished by the eternal wound of love.
 There, his chiseled neck thrown back, he gapes at you,
 Goddess, and feeds his greedy eyes with love;
 He reclines; his spirit lingers upon your lips.
 Melting about him, goddess, as he rests
 On your holy body, pour from your lips sweet nothings,
 40 Seeking, renowned one, quiet peace for Rome.
 For I cannot work with a clear mind while my country
 Suffers, nor can the illustrious scion of
 The Memmian house neglect the common good.

For by necessity the gods above
 Enjoy eternity in highest peace,
 Withdrawn and far removed from our affairs.
 Free of all sorrow, free of peril, the gods
 Thrive in their own works and need nothing from us,
 Not won with virtuous deeds nor touched by rage.

50 Then withdraw from cares and apply your cunning mind
 To hear the truth of reasoned theory,
 That the verses I give you, arranged with diligent love,
 You will not scorn before you understand.
 I open for you by discussing the ultimate law
 Of the gods and sky; I reveal the atoms, whence
 Nature creates and feeds and grows all things
 And into which she resolves them when they are spent;
 "Matter," "engendering bodies," "the seeds of things"
 Are other terms for atoms which I use
 60 In setting forth their laws; and "first beginnings"—
 For from these elements all the world is formed.

When before our eyes man's life lay groveling, prostrate,
 Crushed to the dust under the burden of Religion

(Which thrust its head from heaven, its horrible face
 Glowering over mankind born to die),
 One man, a Greek, was the first mortal who dared
 Oppose his eyes, the first to stand firm in defiance.
 Not the fables of gods, nor lightning, nor the menacing
 Rumble of heaven could daunt him, but all the more
 They whetted his keen mind with longing to be 70
 First to smash open the tight-barred gates of Nature.
 His vigor of mind prevailed, and he strode far
 Beyond the fiery battlements of the world,
 Raiding the fields of the unmeasured All.
 Our victor returns with knowledge of what can arise,
 What cannot, what law grants each thing its own
 Deep-driven boundary stone and finite scope.
 Religion now lies trampled beneath our feet,
 And we are made gods by the victory.

You hear these things, and I fear you'll think yourself 80
 On the road to evil, learning the fundamentals
 Of blasphemy. Not so! Too often Religion
 Herself gives birth to evil and blasphemous deeds.
 At Aulis, for instance: the pride of the Greek people,
 The chosen peers, defiled Diana's altar
 With the shameful blood of the virgin Iphigenia.
 As soon as they tressed her hair with the ritual fillet,
 The tassels spilling neatly upon each cheek,
 And she sensed her grieving father beside the altar
 With the acolytes nearby, hiding the knife, 90
 And countrymen weeping to look upon her—mute
 With fear, she fell to her knees, she groped for the earth.
 Poor girl, what good did it do her then, that she
 Was the first to give the king the name of "father"?
 Up to the altar the men escorted her, trembling;
 Not so that when her solemn rites were finished
 She might be cheered in the ringing wedding-hymn,
 But filthily, at the marrying age, unblemished
 Victim, she fell by her father's slaughter-stroke

100 To shove his fleet off on a *bon voyage!*
 Such wickedness Religion can incite!

You too, someday, will try to turn deserter,
 Taken by so-called prophets and their ravings.
 That's no surprise. What dreams they'll engineer
 To overthrow your reasoned way of life
 And stir up fear and trouble all your fortune!
 They know their trade—for if men could see that hardships
 Have their sure end, made strong by reason, they
 Might then withstand those superstitious threats.

110 But now no reason, no force can stand and fight:
 We fear perpetual torments after death.
 Men don't know what the soul is, don't know whether
 It's born or it slips into the child being born,
 Whether torn apart by death it perishes with us,
 Or views the gloom of Hell and the vast gulfs,
 Or slips by miracle into other beasts
 As our Ennius sang, the first Latin to seize
 The evergreen laurel-crown from the lovely heights
 Of Helicon; through our land his fame shines clear.

120 Yet though his verse is deathless Ennius still
 Proclaims that regions of the dead exist,
 Where neither the body nor the soul endures
 But a sort of shadow or image, strange and pale.
 From there, as he tells it, the specter of ever-thriving
 Homer arose before him and wept salt tears,
 Revealing to him in words the nature of things.
 Well then, though we'll need a reasoned way to explain
 What happens in the sky, the wandering tracks
 Of the sun and moon, and what steers events on earth,

130 Our reasoning must be keen of scent indeed
 To observe the nature of the mind and soul,
 To tell us what those visions are which strike
 When we're awake and ill, or tombed in sleep,
 Terrible visions, as we hear and see
 Near us the dead whose bones the earth has clasped.

It does not slip my mind that the Greeks' dark findings
 Are hard to illustrate in Latin verse,
 Above all when our language lacks the words
 And new terms must be found to treat new subjects.
 And yet your virtue and the hoped-for pleasure 140
 Of a delightful friendship urge me to
 Persevere in my work, to watch through the calm nights,
 Seeking choice words, the song by which at last
 I can open to your mind such dazzling light
 That you may see deep into hidden things.

And so this darkness and terror of the mind
 Shall not by the sun's rays, by the bright lances of daylight
 Be scattered, but by Nature and her law.
 Whose fundamental axiom is this:
 Nothing comes supernaturally from nothing. 150
 Fear grips all mortal men precisely because
 They see so many events on the earth, in the sky,
 Whose rational causes they cannot discern—
 So they suppose it's all the will of the gods.
 But once we've seen that nothing is made from nothing
 We'll find our path and see straight through to what
 We search for: we shall know that things can come
 To be—and in what manner—without gods.

For if something could spring from nothing, then anything
 Could be born from anything, would require no seed. 160
 Men could leap out of the sea, from the earth could arise
 The scaly snakes, and birds could hatch from the sky;
 Cattle, sheep, horses—wild beasts too—would give
 Birth to whatever, dwelling on farms, in forests;
 And fruits would not stay faithful to their trees
 But they would change: all things would bear all things.
 Each thing, then, has its own engendering matter.
 If not, how could the *mother* stay the same?
 But since all creatures rise from their own seeds
 They need a place stocked with their stuff, their atoms, 170

Whence they are born and emerge to the shores of light.
 Everything can't just spring from anything;
 Inner capacities make things what they are.
 Why, too, does the rose bloom in spring, grain ripen in summer,
 The vine pour forth its fruit at the urging of autumn,
 Unless the seeds specific to each thing
 Join at the right time to reveal the creature,
 Which the mild weather and quickening earth will bear
 Safely—so tender it is—to the shores of light?
 180 But if they could come from nothing, at once they'd spring
 Up out of season, gestations all haphazard,
 For there would be no atoms to be blocked
 From a birth-giving union at bad times.
 Also, whatever grows would need no time
 For the coming-together of seeds, if it rose from nothing.
 A little baby is—presto! a young man,
 And seedlings leap through the earth as full-grown trees.
 None of this happens, we know—for little by little
 Things grow, as is proper, from a certain seed,
 190 And in their growing they preserve their kinds.
 You see, then, that things grow tall and are nourished by
 matter
 Suitable to themselves. And the earth could never
 Send up its lusty offspring without certain
 Seasonal rains; deprived of food, no animal
 Can reproduce or stay alive. Believe, then,
 As all words share one alphabet, so too
 Many things may be made from the same atoms—
 And not that things exist with none at all!
 Besides, why is it that Nature cannot fashion
 200 Giants to ford the sea in a few strides
 And shear away great mountains with bare hands
 And outlive many generations? Surely
 A certain matter is given each thing for growth
 And birth, determining what can arise.
 Nothing from nothing—that must be admitted,
 Since things need the right seeds, their first-beginnings,

To be brought forth into the gentle breeze.
 Last, since we see that a tilled field repays
 Our hands with finer crops, there must of course
 Be atoms down in the earth, and when we plow 210
 The rich clumps, turning them over, working the soil
 Till it's loose and soft, we stir these seeds to life.
 If there were none, then with no sweat we'd have
 Those finer crops spring up spontaneously.

There's more: Nature dissolves all things into
 Their atoms; things can't die back down to nothing.
 For if things could die, atoms and all, then death
 Would snatch them away before our very eyes.
 No need then for a force to split them apart
 Or to unravel the knitting-together of atoms. 220
 But since all is made of everlasting seeds,
 Until some force meets a thing head-on and shatters it,
 Or penetrates the spaces between the atoms
 And loosens their ties, Nature allows no death.
 Besides, whatever old age clears away,
 Were time to consume its matter and kill it completely,
 How could Venus lead the animals, kind by kind,
 To the light of life, or how could the artful earth
 Feed them with food for their kinds and cause them to grow?
 Out of what would the inner springs and the distant rivers 230
 Sustain the sea? Or the heavens pasture the stars?
 Anything made out of destructible matter
 Infinite time would have devoured before.
 But if the atoms that make and replenish the world
 Have endured through the immense span of the past
 Their natures are immortal—that is clear.
 Never can things revert to nothingness!

Further, the same force, the same cause would crush
 Anything at all, unless indestructible matter
 Held fast the knots more or less tightly knit. 240
 A touch would kill at once, unless there were

Indestructible atoms whose intertwinings
Some force would have to sever. Now, because
The weaves these atoms fashion are all unlike,
And matter itself is indestructible,
Things must remain intact, till a force comes
Sharp enough to destroy their inner structure.
Nothing returns to nothing; when things shatter
They all return to their constituent atoms.
250 Yes, the rain passes away, when Father Sky
Pours it down into the lap of Mother Earth.
But the glossy corn swells forth and the branches sprout
Green leaves and trees grow tall and heavy with fruit.
From these we and the beasts are nourished; from these
Come bustling cities that blossom out with children,
And leaf-springing woods that sing with young birds' song;
Cattle, weary, lie down in their fields, having fed
Of the fat of the land; glistening dew of milk
Drips from the swollen teat; the younglings caper
260 On their unsteady limbs through the tender grass,
Their little heads made tipsy by milk drunk straight!
Nothing can dwindle to nothing, as Nature restores
One thing from the stuff of another, nor does she allow
A birth, without a corresponding death.

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BOOK TWO



How sweet, to watch from the shore the wind-whipped ocean
Toss someone else's ship in a mighty struggle;
Not that the man's distress is cause for mirth—
Your freedom from those troubles is what's sweet;
And sweet, to see great lines of soldiers marshaled
In the plains of war, when you are free from peril;
But nothing is sweeter than to dwell in the calm
Temples of truth, the strongholds of the wise.
You can, from there; look down upon others wandering
Randomly, straying, seeking the path of life, 10
Warring with all their talent, wrestling for rank,
Night and day straining with the utmost toil
To fight their way to the heights of wealth and power.

O heart of man, how pitiful and blind!
In what benightedness with all its perils
Our time, so short, is squandered! And not to see
That our nature yelps after this alone: that the body
Be free of pain, the mind enjoy the sense
Of pleasure, far removed from care or fear!
And so we see what little our bodies need, 20
Only such things as soothe the pain away.
This little too will spread the table and make
Many delights more welcome—though Nature doesn't
Demand that golden statues of young men
Grasping the fiery torches in their hands
Light up your midnight palace bacchanals,
Or your halls blaze with silver or gleam with gold,

Or the lute resound from gilded tile and timber —
Rather, when friends in the soft grass lie at ease,
30 In the shade of a tall tree by the riverside,
Their bodies refreshed and gladdened, at no great cost,
Most pleasantly when the weather smiles and the season
Sprinkles the grassy meadow with new flowers.
But the flush of fever will not subside the sooner
For your floral quilts, your tossing and turning in purple,
Than if you slept in homely coverlets.
Since luxury, then, is useless for our bodies,
Nor can rank or rule do us the slightest good,
It stands to reason they cannot aid the mind —
40 Unless, perhaps, as you watch your troops in the drill field
Seething and swarming and spurring their shadow-battles,
Shored up with vast reserves and cavalry,
Each side adorned with equal arms and courage,
Or you see your fleet churn up the far-flung sea,
At the sight of these religion panics, flies
Quaking with fright from your soul; the fear of death
Will leave your heart then, light and free of care.
But this is silly pomp and circumstance.
In fact, the fears of men, their dogged cares
50 Never fly the clashing of steel or the fierce spears,
But among kings and potentates yet strut
With bold contempt — won't bow to the flash of gold
Or the bright splendor of a purple robe.
Why doubt, the power belongs instead to reason,
Seeing that all life struggles in such darkness?
For as little boys tremble and fear whatever's lurking
In the blind dark, so we in the light of day
Tremble at what is no more terrible than
What little boys dream in the dark and fear will come.
60 And so this darkness and terror of the mind
Shall not by the sun's rays, by the bright lances of daylight
Be scattered, but by Nature and her law.

Now I assert, the spirit and the soul
 Are held conjoint and form one common nature,
 But the captain, so to speak, and lord of the body
 Is the judgment, which we call the soul or mind.
 It sits fixed in the center of the breast. 140
 Here alarm bucks loose, and dread, and round these regions
 Gladness caresses. Here, then, is the mind, the soul.
 The other, the spirit, sown broadcast through the body,
 Obeys and moves to the mind's sway and will.
 The mind thinks by itself, joys in itself,
 Even when nothing is stirring the spirit or body.
 And as when our head or eye is stricken with
 Some trying pain, we're still not torture-crossed
 Throughout the body, so the mind itself
 Will grieve or flourish in gladness while the spirit, 150
 Spread through the frame, is touched by nothing new.
 But when the fear that troubles the mind is more
 Vehement, we see the spirit in all the members
 Agree, and the body blanches and beads of sweat
 Break out all over, the tongue-tied voice cracks, falters,
 It's dusk with the eyes, ears ring, limbs buckle and give,
 And yes, we see men terrified in mind
 Crumple—so anyone should easily learn
 That the spirit and mind are one, for when spirit is struck
 By the force of the mind, it thrusts and hurls the body. 160

This reasoning also shows that mind and spirit
 Are corporeal. When they can shove the limbs,
 Snatching the sleeping body and discomposing
 The features, wheeling and steering the whole person
 (None of which, we see, can come to pass without
 Touch, and all touch implies a body), must
 You not confess, the soul's corporeal?

And more: you'll notice the soul, as one with the body,
 Is affected the same and shares the body's feeling.
 170 If your life's not dashed by the force of a quivering lance
 Thrust home to split the bones and muscles open,
 Still languor will follow, and the soothing swoon to the earth,
 And as you lie on the ground your mind's a whirl
 With willing and not willing to arise.
 The soul must therefore be corporeal, since
 Corporeal lances jab it and make it stagger.

What sorts of atoms constitute the soul
 And where they come from, I'll explain to you.
 To start, I say that the soul is super-subtle,
 180 Composed of tiniest particles. Consider,
 To prove the truth of my hypothesis,
 That nothing we see can happen so swiftly as
 The mind imagines and initiates.
 Quicker therefore the mind will spur itself
 Than anything we see before our eyes.
 But since it's so quick to move, it must consist
 Of the roundest and tiniest seeds, so that a small
 Impulse can drive them forward into motion.
 For water will ripple under the littlest impulse,
 190 Made up of tiny and turnable tumbling figures.
 By contrast, honey stands thick, sticks, won't budge,
 Its juice more sluggish, motion more reluctant.
 For all its wealth of atoms clogs and clings
 Together; no surprise, as it's not made
 Of atoms so smooth or subtle or round and rolling.
 And a puff—half-held and light—can send your mound
 Of poppyseed spilling and scattering down from the summit;
 By contrast, a rock heap or cornstalk rick
 Won't. And so the smaller the bodies and smoother,
 200 The more a thing enjoys mobility.
 But then whatever you come upon that's heavy,
 Rough, sharp—to that extent these things stand stable.
 Now, therefore, since we've found the soul to be

Exceedingly mobile, it must then consist
 Of atoms awfully tiny and smooth and rolling.
 This knowledge, my good reader, you will find
 Useful and opportune in many matters.

This too will help establish the soul's nature,
 How finely woven it is and what small space
 Would hold it, if it could be gathered up: 210
 That as soon as the imperturbable peace of Death
 Lays hold of a man, and the mind and soul have departed,
 You detect nothing dwindling from the body,
 Nothing to see or to weigh. Death guarantees
 All, save life-giving sense and the moist warm breath.
 Thus all the soul must of necessity
 Be made of the tiniest seeds, be interwoven
 So fully with veins, flesh, muscle that when it leaves
 The body deserted, the outer contour is
 Preserved intact and not a jot the lighter. 220
 It's like bouquets of wine that evanesce,
 Or the sweet breath of perfume that floats away,
 Or savors that abandon any body.
 Still to the eyes these things look none the smaller
 And not a grain of weight seems drawn away:
 No wonder, for many and tiny seeds create
 Aroma and savor, diffuse through the whole body.
 So again and again I say the mind and spirit
 Are made up of the tiniest, tiniest seeds,
 For when they flee they steal no weight away. 230

And so the soul's enclosed by the whole body;
It is the body's guard and cause of health.
They twine together with common roots, nor can
One be plucked loose without destroying both.
As easily could you tear the aroma from
A lump of myrrh, and not destroy its essence,
As you could draw the soul and spirit from
330 The body, and not have it all dissolve.
For from the beginning they share the seat of life,
Their atoms so interwoven; nor, it's clear,
Can the body or the soul, all by itself,
Without the power of the other, feel sensation,
But from those common motions sprung from both,
Sensation is kindled and fanned high in our flesh.
Furthermore, body is never born alone,
Never grows alone or lasts long after death.
It's not like heated water that releases
340 Its heat as steam, while the water remains intact,
Not rent by the release—not so, I tell you,
Can the limbs, abandoned, suffer the soul's separation,
But rent to the core they die and rot away.
From the earliest age the mutual touchings of

The soul and body learn the vital motions,
Even while dwelling deep in the mother's womb,
So that divorce must sicken and kill both;
Then, since their wedlock brings them health, you should
See that their natures also must be wedded.

460 Here we should note that as the body itself
Is racked with violent sickness and sharp pain,
So the soul's seized with trouble and fear and sorrow.
It follows that the soul will share in Death.
For when the body is ill the soul will often
Wander; he loses his train of thought, he speaks
Astray, while drowsiness sinks him into a deep
And lasting coma—the head nods, the lids fall.
Where he is, he can hear no voices, recognize
No faces of those who surround him and call him back
To life, dewing their cheeks and lips with tears.
470 Admit, therefore, the soul dissolves—you must,
When the touch of sickness penetrates so far.
And pain and disease are both Death's artisans,
As we've learned so well from watching many die.
Yes, why is it then, when wine has stung a man
To the quick, his blood aglow with the heat it lends him,
The limbs, as a consequence, grow heavy; tripped, tangled,
Legs stagger, the thick speech lags, the thoughts are soused,
Eyes swim, and roaring and sobbing and brawls break out?
And all the rest of this sort of thing that follows,
480 Why is it? If not that the thrust and throttle of wine
Makes a habit of whipping the soul—and this, in the body!
But whatever can be throttled or trip-and-tangled,
Shows us that if a little rougher force

Finds a way in, it will die, its future lost.
 Why, the sudden power of sickness before our eyes
 Will sometimes strike a man like a thunderbolt—
 He crumples, froths at the mouth, moans, thrashes, raves,
 Stiffens and wrenches his muscles, writhes and gasps
 Fitfully, arms and legs flung to exhaustion.
 Sure enough: the violent sickness spreads through the body, 490
 Disorders it, drives the soul out, frothing—as waves
 Of the salt sea seethe and foam in the battering wind.
 Groans are wrung out because the limbs are racked
 With pain, but chiefly because the vocal-atoms
 Are spit up in a mass on the lips outside,
 On the road, you might say, where they're used to go.
 The raving comes when the powers of soul and spirit
 Are jarred and, as I've shown, wrenched one from the other,
 Sundered and torn apart by the same poison.
 Then, when the illness has broken, and the black bile 500
 Returns to its dens in the corrupted body,
 He staggers to his feet, a little queasy,
 Returns to his senses and takes the soul back in.
 So if these are thrown for a fall—while in the body—
 And torn and bruised so badly by such diseases,
 Why then do you think that in open air, alone,
 They can survive the battering of the wind?
 And since we see that the mind, like a sick body,
 Can be brought round by medicine and made whole,
 That's our prognosis: souls live but to die. 510
 You've got to add parts or scramble the order around
 Or lift a jot directly from the whole
 If you would undertake to change the spirit
 Or bend the nature of any living thing.
 But what's immortal allows no shuffle of parts,
 No jot to trickle in or be skimmed away,
 For change that leads a thing beyond its limits
 Is instant death to the original.
 So if the soul falls ill or is brought round
 By medicine, those are signs that it must die, 520

As I've taught. The facts charge on to block the path
 Of false reasoning and head off its retreat,
 Routing it with a double-pronged rebuttal.

Yes, often we watch a man die by degrees,
 Member by member losing the sense of life:
 The toes and the toenails first turn black; then the feet,
 The legs die; then creeping through all the other limbs
 The chilling pace of Death will make its way.
 Since the soul is sundered here and doesn't come out
 530 Unscathed or in one piece, it must be mortal.
 What if you think the soul can draw itself
 In from the limbs, contracting its parts into
 One, and there stow away the members' senses?
 And yet that place where so much soul's collected
 Should be super-sensitive! That never happens;
 Don't wonder if, as I've said, the soul is sliced
 To ribbons and scattered away. Conclude: it dies.
 Even if we concede what is flat wrong
 And grant that the soul can shrink into one lump
 540 As the dying, little by little, lose the light,
 Still we must then admit the soul shall die;
 Let it die scattered to the winds, grow dull, blank,
 All its parts clumping up—it doesn't matter,
 When the senses fail him everywhere more and more
 And less and less of life remains behind.

And since the mind is just one part of a man,
 Fixed in its proper place, like eyes and ears
 And the other organs of sense that steer our lives,
 And just as a hand or an eye or nose if severed
 550 From us, can neither sense nor even be
 (Rather resolves directly into rot),
 So by itself the soul can't live—it needs
 The body, the man who is its vessel, or
 Whatever image you can find that joins
 More intimately, for the body is bound fast.

Indeed, the living powers of body and soul
 Join in their strength, delight in life together.
 For without the body, alone, the soul cannot
 Make motions that bring forth life; if stripped of soul
 The body can't last long or use its senses. 560
 Know then, as an eye that's plucked out roots and all
 Sees nothing, torn away from the rest of the body,
 So too, alone, the spirit can do nothing.
 Of course—for mingled in the veins and flesh,
 In bone and muscle, the atoms of soul are held
 By the whole body and can't leap free in flight
 Over great intervals; shut in, they stir
 The sense-bearing motions, but cast by death from the body
 Into the winds they cannot make those motions
 Because they're not confined in the same way. 570
 A body, a breathing thing—air would be *that*
 If it could bind the soul and lock it into
 Motions that stirred in the sinews once, in the body.
 So again I argue, if the sheltering body
 Is undone, and the breath of life is cast away,
 The soul and sense—you must admit—dissolve;
 Conjunction is the cause of life for both.

Well then, if the body can't outlast the departure
 Of soul, but dwindles into the stench of rot,
 Why hesitate to say that the soul is gathered 580
 And seeps away like so much smoke spilled out,
 That the body, now altered, crumbles into ruin
 And falls apart, foundations jolted from
 Their proper places, letting the soul seep out
 Through all the limbs and winding passageways
 And chinks in the wall? So many proofs should show you
 That when it leaves the limbs the soul's been split,
 Torn into pieces first in the very body
 Before it slips out, floating in the wind.

Besides the fact that the soul falls sick with the body,
A thought of things to come will strike the soul
And starve it hollow, harass it with worry and fear,
While the remorse for old sins gnaws away;
Add the mind's own madness and forgetfulness;
Add that it drowns in the black depths of coma.

Death, then, is nothing to us, no concern,
Once we grant that the soul will also die.

830 Just as we felt no pain in ages past
When the Carthaginians swarmed to the attack
And under the sky's high shores the whole world shook,
Struck by the shocks of war and alarm and riot,
All mankind over land and ocean in
The balance, whether to fall to the rule of either—
So too, when we no longer are, when our
Union of body and soul is put asunder,
Hardly shall anything then, when we are not,
Happen to us at all and stir the senses,
Not if earth were embroiled with the sea and the sea with heaven!

And even if the soul, ripped from the body, 840
 Retained the power to feel, that still would be
 Nothing to us, whose beings have been fashioned
 By one fit marriage of one body and soul.
 And if the Ages should collect our matter
 After we die and return our present forms,
 Lending us once again the light of life,
 Even that won't mean anything to us,
 Once our continuation has been snapped.
 Who we once were can't touch us now at all;
 Nor are we gripped with care for who we'll be. 850
 When you reflect on the unmeasured span
 Of ages past, how many and various were
 The motions of matter, you may rest assured
 That the seeds at times were placed in the same order
 As these seeds which compose us now; a fact
 That the mind can't retain in memory.
 There's been a halt—hiatus—in our lives,
 And all the motions of sense have gone astray.
 Thus if your future is misery and sickness
 You've got to exist in that same future time 860
 For the ill to catch you. But since death clears the deck,
 Forbidding that would-be sufferer to exist,
 Nothing at all have we to fear from death;
 He who cannot exist cannot feel pain,
 Or care if he's never born again, once death
 That does not die has seized his dying life.

Now if you happen to see someone resent
 That after death he'll be put down to stink
 Or be picked apart by beasts or burnt on the pyre,
 You'll know that he doesn't ring true, that something hidden 870
 Rankles his heart—no matter how often he says
 He trusts that there's no feeling after death.
 He doesn't grant the premise or conclusion,
 Can't pluck himself out of life by the roots and chuck it;
 He posits, unknowing, a bit of himself left over.

For when anyone living puts it that his body,
 Dead, will be laced by the birds and the wild beasts,
 It's himself he pities! He can't cut himself free
 From the castoff body—no, he dreams it's him,
 880 Stands by, infects it with his own sensation.
 So he resents that he was formed to die;
 Can't see that when he dies there'll be no other
 Him living to moan that he's bereft of him,
 Weeping because he's lying scorched or mangled.
 If in death it's bad to be treated to wild beasts
 And the jaws that rip, I don't see why it's not
 Bitter to lie there roasting in brilliant flames
 Or to smother in balm and honey or grow stiff
 With cold as you lie on your ice-hard bed of stone,
 890 Or be squashed flat by the earth's crushing weight.

“Now—now—no happy home, no darling wife
 Will greet you, no sweet children race to steal
 Kisses, and touch your heart with quiet joy.
 You'll never rule the roost or watch your business
 Flourish. From you, poor boy, poor boy,” they say,
 “One bad day's stolen all life has to win.”
 “Not one desire for any of these things,”
 They don't add, “will beset you anymore.”
 If they could see *that*, and speak accordingly,
 900 Their souls would slip the tight strong clench of fear.

“Sure, you enjoy the sleep of death—you're free
 Of all the bitter pains that were to come.
 But we stand shuddering by your pyre of ash,
 Insatiably lamenting; nevermore
 Shall this great grief be lifted from our hearts.”
 Better ask this fellow: what's so very bitter
 If the whole business comes to sleep and quiet?
 Why waste away with his everlasting tears?

When men lie back and shade their eyes with garland
 910 And tip a few too many, they love to utter

Such heartfelt stuff, "Ah, we only go round once, boys!
 Soon over the hill—and there's no turning back!"
 As if the worst of death were really this,
 That the poor souls would be so dry they'd parch
 With thirst, or that some other want would catch them!
 But no one searches for himself or life
 When body and mind together rest in sleep.
 For all we'd care, that sleep could be eternal;
 No longing for our waking selves would move us.
 Yet when we sleep our atoms never stray 920
 Far from the sense-bearing motions—for a man
 Can snatch himself from bed and gather his wits.
 Much less, then, should we be concerned with death,
 Less than the *nothing* that we think of sleep!
 For greater is the whirl and scatter of atoms
 Which follows death; no one will wake and rise
 Once the cold halt in life has caught him up.

Yes, if Nature herself should suddenly raise her voice
 Against one of us, and rebuke him in this way,
 "What's the matter, mortal, with you, that you coddle yourself 930
 With all this sorrow? Why moan and wail at death?
 If your life's been happy and blessed, and all those blessings
 Haven't been poured into a leaky pot
 To spill away, with nothing left to give thanks for,
 Why not, as a man who's feasted full of life,
 Retire contented—fool!—and rest in peace?
 But if all the blessings squandered on you are gone
 And life's so hateful, why add still more? What use?
 They'll all turn sour again and come to nothing!
 Why don't you strive instead to end your life? 940
 For what else can I find or make to please you?
 There's nothing—all things always stay the same.
 If your body's not shriveled with years and your arms and legs
 Still don't hang nerveless, well, things stay the same,
 The same, should you go and outlast generations,
 Just more of the same, if you never happen to die—"
 What shall we say in defense, if not that Nature's

Complaint is just and her indictment true?
 And if some high and mighty older man
 950 Should whimper, poor fellow, too sadly that he must go,
 Let her cry the louder and lash out in reproof!
 "Get your sobs out of here, scoundrel, and quit your whining!
 You mope—though you've rifled all life has to win;
 But since you scorn what's here and crave what's not,
 Your life—unfinished, thankless—slips away,
 And so you're shocked that Death is waiting now
 Before you're stuffed and ready to leave the table.
 Give it up, old man, it doesn't become your years.
 Come, be content! Give way to your heirs! You must."
 960 Just, would her charge be! Just, her rebuke, her outcry!
 The old, shoved out, must always cede to the new,
 One thing restores another; it must be.
 And no one's flung to the pit or the pains of Hell.
 We need those atoms for our progeny
 Who, though they live life full, shall follow us.
 Before you came, men died—and they will die.
 One thing gives rise to another, incessantly;
 Life's given to no one outright; all must borrow.
 Reflect how the span of the endless ancient past
 970 Before our births means nothing at all to us.
 Here Nature has provided us a mirror
 Of the time to come when we at last have died.
 Is there horror in the prospect? Any sorrow?
 Isn't it freer from care than the sweetest sleep?

But the things that are said to exist in the depths of Hell
 Are all, to no surprise, part of our lives.
 No fairy-tale Tantalus, frozen in empty fear,
 Pathetically shudders under a teetering stone;
 Rather here, in life, an empty fear of the gods
 980 Looms, and it's chance that brings the fall we dread.
 No birds delve into a Tityus flat in Hell
 Or prick for a morsel left in that huge liver
 Throughout time everlasting—really now!

Let him stretch out, if you like, immense in bulk,
 His splayed limbs spanning not nine acres merely
 But the whole globe; nevertheless, he'd not
 Be able to suffer everlasting pain
 Or offer the food of his body forever and ever.
 Our Tityus is here—a man laid flat by love,
 Whom the birds peck apart—that's gnawing worry 990
 Or other cares that tear us with desire.
 In life we've Sisyphus too, before our eyes,
 Drunk with campaigning for the rods of power,
 And always the people send him home to sulk.
 To canvass for power—unattainable, useless—
 And ever to sweat and suffer hardship for it,
 That's to push and push up a mountain a heavily-leaning
 Boulder—which tumbles right back down from the summit
 Anyhow, bouncing and bounding down to the plain.
 Then to feed forever your ingrate heart, to take 1000
 Your fill of the good things, stuffed but still not full
 (As the returning seasons in their rounds
 Bring us fresh life and harvest and delight,
 The fruits of life that never seem to fill us)
 That's the old tale, I think, of the ripe young virgins
 Gathering water in a leaky pot
 That couldn't be filled no matter what they did.
 And Cerberus and the Furies, see, and the darkness,
 Tartarus belching blasts from his horrible maw,
 Really, they can't exist and never have! 1010
 But in life infamous fear of punishment for
 Infamous crimes is how we pay for evil.
 Prison, and being flung from the frightful Rock,
 Flogging and chopping, racking, tarring, torching,
 Take these away—still the man who knows his sin
 Anticipates, and whips himself hot with terror,
 And never sees where misery can have
 Its terminus, and punishments their limit;
 He fears they may grow heavier still in death.
 This life of fools, then, *this* is the true Hell. 1020

Sometimes you should remind yourself, "For shame!
 The good king Ancus lost the light of day
 And he was a far better man than you.
 And many other kings and potentates
 Have fallen, once commanders of great nations.
 Even that ruler who over the ocean once
 Laid down a road for legions to bridge the deep,
 Taught them to go over the salt gulfs on foot,
 Who scorned with a trample of hooves the hissing sea,
 1030 Robbed of light, from a dying body poured his soul.
 And Scipio, the battle-lightning, the terror of Carthage,
 Gave his bones to the earth like the meanest slave.
 Include discoverers of truth and beauty,
 Include the poets—among whom solely-sceptered
 Homer sleeps just as soundly as the rest.
 And when ripe age had warned Democritus
 That the motions of his memory were fading,
 He accosted Death and offered his own head.
 Even Epicurus died, his light of life
 1040 Run to the finish; the mind who bested all,
 Who doused their light as the sunrise dims the stars.
 Who are *you* to be reluctant about dying?
 You with your half-dead life still kicking about!
 You fritter most of your last years asleep,
 You snore when you're awake, and you're always dreaming,
 Carrying around a mind that's touchy, panicky,
 But you can't tell what's the everlasting trouble,
 You're so groggy and worried and jostled on all sides,
 And you wander and drift along you don't know where."

 1050 If, when men sense a weight upon their minds,
 A trouble deep within that wearies them,
 They could but recognize the source, and know
 Why such huge misery masses in the heart,
 They'd never lead their lives as we see now—
 As men who never know what they want, who move
 From place to place to lay their burden down.

Out of his mansion he's got to go, that fool,
Home bores him to death, and yet he turns right back,
Finding that things are just as dull outside.
Swift, to the villa he spurs his galloping ponies, 1060
Bringing relief—you'd think—to a house afire.
But soon as he touches the villa door, he yawns,
Tries to forget, falls heavily asleep,
Or hurries out to see the town again.
We flee ourselves, whom we can never flee.
Against our will the self we hate clings tight
For we are sick and do not grasp the cause.
If he could see it, he might leave his worries
And strive to understand the nature of things,
For not an hour but all eternity 1070
Is here at issue: what the state will be
Of the time left for each man after death.

What vicious yearning for life, then, makes us hurry
In such a panic, attacked by doubts and dangers?
This much is sure: the end of life awaits us,
The summons must be answered; we must die.
As it is, we lurch in the same ruts; no new pleasure
Is forged for us from drawing out our lives.
Whatever we lack, we want, we think it excels
All else, but when we've grabbed it something new 1080
We thirst for, always panting after life.
Yet we don't know what fortune the years will bring,
What luck we'll have, and what our end will be.
And long life won't allow us to pluck out
One moment from our span beyond the grave
That we might spend a shorter time in death.
Survive this generation and the next—
Nevertheless eternal death awaits,
Nor will the man who died with the sun today
Be nonexistent for less time than he 1090
Who fell last month—or centuries ago.