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Book 1

A Visitor in Prison

I, who once wrote songs with joyful eagerness,
alas, am now forced to sing sad verses with
weeping.¹
Behold, the Muses,² torn with grief, bid me write.
And so these mournful verses wet my cheeks with
honest tears.
No terror can discourage these ladies, at least,
from coming as my companions on this journey.
They once were the glory of my green and happy
youth,
now in my sad old age they comfort me.³
For age has come unexpected, hastened by evils,
and sorrow has added her years to mine.
My hair is too soon white upon my head,
and my skin hangs loose on my trembling body.
Happy is death when it thrusts itself upon us not in the
sweet years

but comes instead to those wretches who call for it
often.

Oh woe! It turns away with a deaf ear from the
miserable

and cruelly refuses to close my weeping eyes.

Once treacherous Fortune⁴ favored me with passing joys,
then the bitter hour came that bowed my head.

Now in darkness she has changed her deceitful face,
so that my cursed life drags on with unwelcome
days.

Why, my friends, did you so often call me blessed?
The one who fell was never on solid ground.

While I was silently thinking these things to myself and writing down this tearful lament with the help of my pen, there seemed to stand above my head a woman, awe-inspiring in her appearance. Her eyes burned with fire and penetrated far beyond what is common for mortals. She had a vivid color and inexhaustible strength, yet she seemed so ancient I could scarcely believe she belonged to our age. Her height was hard to say, for sometimes she seemed to confine herself within ordinary human measure, but at other times she seemed to touch the sky with the top of her head. Then, when she lifted herself higher still, she seemed to break through the heavens and disappear beyond the sight of mortals.

Her clothing was made of the most delicate, imperishable material, woven with great skill—I later learned, for she told me, that she had made it with her own hands. But a dark film from long neglect covered her clothes, as with smoky images.⁵ On the bottom hem was woven the Greek letter *Pi*, while on

the top of the garment was a *Theta*. Between the two letters was a ladder of steps rising from the lower to the higher, as if one might climb it.⁶ This same garment had been torn by the hands of violent men, who each had carried off a scrap of cloth as they were able. In her right hand the lady carried books, but in her left she bore a scepter.

When she saw the Muses of poetry standing by my bed dictating words to accompany my tears, she grew angry for a moment, and her eyes flashed with raging fire.

“Who,” she said, “allowed these theatrical whores to visit this sick man? Not only have they no remedies for his pains, but their sweet poisons make it worse! These are the women who choke off the rich fruit of reason with barren thorns of emotion. They accustom the minds of mortals to sickness rather than curing them. If you were seducing some ordinary man with your empty lies as you usually do, it wouldn’t matter so much to me. You wouldn’t be hindering my work so much then. But this man was nourished on the teachings of Parmenides and Plato!⁷ Get out of here now, you Sirens,⁸ you who so sweetly bring destruction to mortals! Leave him for *my* Muses to care for and make whole.”

Shamed by her words, they hung their heads while their blushes confirmed the truth. In sorrow they then departed my room. But I—whose vision was so blinded by tears that I couldn’t recognize this woman of such commanding authority—was struck dumb and lowered my eyes to the ground, waiting in silence for what she would do next. She came closer and sat on the edge of my bed. Then she gazed at my face, so worn with grief and cast down to the earth in sorrow. Sadly she began to mourn the confusion of my mind with these verses:

Do You Remember Me?

“Alas,⁹ plunged to the depths of stormy seas,
the mind grows dim, casting off its own light,
seeking instead the darkness beyond.
Thus swollen by earthly winds,
hateful anxiety grows beyond measure.
This man once wandered free under open sky,
following the familiar paths of the heavens.
He observed the constellations of the rising sun
and watched the stars of the cold moon.
And whenever a planet on its wandering course
moved bending through its changing orbit,
he understood, mastering it with numbers.¹⁰
This man here once investigated causes—
why stormy winds rouse the waters of the sea,
what breath turns the unmoving earth,
why the sun sets beneath the western waves
then rises again in the rosy east,
what calms the peaceful days of spring
so that the world is adorned with blooming flowers,
who made autumn fertile when the year is full,
bursting with heavy grapes.
This man once probed and proclaimed
the varied causes of nature’s secrets.
But now he’s lying here, the light of his mind
darkened,
weighed down with heavy chains about his neck.¹¹
His face pulled down beneath the weight of care,
alas, he sees only the lowly earth beneath him.

“But now is time for medicine,” she said, “not complaining.”

Then, looking at me intently with her eyes, she said:

“Are you that man who once was nursed on my milk and nourished with my food until you grew into the full strength of your mind? And didn’t I give you such weapons as would protect you even now, unconquered and steadfast, if you hadn’t thrown them all away? Don’t you recognize me? Why are you silent? Is it from shame or confusion? I would prefer it were shame, but, as I see now, it’s confusion.”

And when she saw that I was not only silent but completely speechless and unable to talk, she gently placed her hand on my chest and said: “There is no real danger here. He suffers only from forgetfulness, a common disease of deceived minds. He has forgotten for a little while who he is. He will remember easily enough, for he knew me once before.¹² And so that he might remember, let’s clear away for a time that blinding cloud of worldly cares from his eyes.”¹³

Saying this, she gathered together the folds of her robe and wiped away the tears filling my eyes.

Recognition at Last

Then with night dispersed, the darkness fled
and the strength of former days returned to my eyes.

Just as when black clouds are gathered by the wild

West Wind

and the sky hangs thick with storms,
when the sun lies hidden and no stars return to the
heavens

and dark night pours onto the earth from above.

But then, if the North Wind released from its Thracian
cave
should beat back the darkness and free the captive
day,
suddenly dazzling Phoebus¹⁴ shines bright,
striking with his rays our wondering eyes.

In this same way, the clouds of my misery were scattered and I drank in the light. Then my memory returned enough to recognize the face of the one who healed me. When I turned my eyes to her and looked closely, I saw my nurse in whose home I had dwelled since my youth—Philosophy.

“Why,” I said, “have you, teacher of all virtues, come down from the heights of heaven to my lonely place of exile? Are you here to suffer false accusations along with me?”

“Would I desert you, my child?” she replied. “Wouldn’t I share with you this labor and burden you bear because of the hatred of my name? Is it right that Philosophy abandon an innocent man to walk his path alone? Did you really believe I would fear an accusation against me, as if that were something new? Did you think this was the first time wisdom has been threatened with danger from those of wicked ways? Didn’t I in ancient days, before the time of my beloved Plato, often join in fierce battle against arrogant stupidity? And although Plato survived, his teacher Socrates won the victory of an unjust death while I stood by his side.¹⁵ Afterward the crowds of Epicureans and Stoics¹⁶ and the rest each in their own way tried to seize his legacy for themselves and so carried me away shouting and struggling, as if I were part of their plunder. They tore at parts of the robe I had woven with my own hands,

thinking as they went away that they had somehow obtained all there was of me. Since they were seen with some little scraps of my clothing, they were foolishly thought to be my companions, and many of them were corrupted by the errors of the ignorant mob.

“But even if you don’t know about the flight of Anaxagoras, the poisoning of Socrates, or the torture of Zeno—they did happen in foreign lands, after all—surely you can recall those like Canius, Seneca, and Soranus, whose memory is neither ancient nor obscure.¹⁷ The only reason they died was that they were devoted to my cause and were seen as utterly disinterested in the ways of evil. And so you shouldn’t be surprised if we are tossed about on the seas of this life by storms blowing from all directions when our greatest goal is to displease wicked men. For even if their army is numerous, we should hold them in contempt, for they are led by no general, rushing here and there as they are driven about by foolish error. And if ever their army attacks us with all their might, our leader withdraws her forces into her own citadel, leaving the enemy to busy themselves plundering our useless baggage. We look down on them and laugh while they grab at everything of least value, while we are safe behind a wall that cannot be scaled by such raging stupidity.

The Complaints of Boethius

“Whoever is tranquil and calm in an ordered life,
trampling proud fate beneath his feet,
and unblinking stares down Fortune good or ill,
able to hold up his head unconquered,

that one will not be troubled by the raging waves of the
sea

when it churns up the tide from deep below,
nor by Vesuvius,¹⁸ whenever from broken furnaces
it casts forth smoking fires,
nor when lightning bolts
strike down lofty towers.

Why do wretched men marvel so
at raging tyrants who have no real strength?

Let go of hope and fear,
then you will disarm impotent anger.¹⁹

But whoever trembles with dread and desires,
since he is not firm and master of himself,
has thrown away his shield and left his post,
fastening the chain by which he is dragged away.

“Do you understand what I’m saying to you?” she asked.
“Have my words made their way into your head? Or are you
like the donkey hearing a lyre?²⁰ Why are you crying? Why
are your cheeks covered with tears? As Homer says, ‘Speak up,
don’t hide what’s on your mind.’²¹ If you want a doctor to treat
you, you first must uncover your wound.”

So I gathered up my courage to its full strength and spoke
to her: “Do I really need to explain to you even now how savage
the attack of Fortune has been against me? Isn’t the cause
of my pain obvious to you? Does this look like the library in
my house, which you yourself chose as your constant dwelling
place? Isn’t that where you would sit with me and talk about
the knowledge of things both human and divine? Did my
clothes or face look like this when I used to probe the secrets

of nature with you, or when you traced the path of the stars for me with your measuring rod, or when you shaped my very reasoning and the course of my whole life according to the heavenly order? Is *this* how you reward those who follow you?

“Aren’t you the one who decreed through the words of Plato that blessed is the state ruled by philosophers or by rulers who love wisdom?²² You warned us through the words of that same man that this is why those devoted to wisdom should enter into political life—to prevent power from falling into the hands of wicked and unprincipled men and so bring ruin and disaster on the good.

“That is why, following your own command, I chose to devote myself to public service and make use of what I learned from you during our quiet hours together. You and the God who planted you in the minds of the wise are my witnesses that I had no other motivation for entering political life than a desire to benefit all good people. But because of this I have faced bitter and relentless conflict with the wicked. And because of my freedom of conscience and upholding of the law, I have faced the constant anger of those more powerful than me.

“How many times did I confront Conigastus when he was trying to steal the wealth of some powerless man? How often did I stop Trigguilla, who was in charge of the king’s household, when he planned to commit some injustice—or even when he already had?²³ How often did I protect some unfortunate soul from the greed of the barbarians (who were never punished) even though using my authority put me in danger? Never has anyone turned me away from justice toward injustice.

“When the estates of families in the provinces were devastated first by greedy individuals and then by state taxation, I grieved as much as those who suffered these injustices. When, in a time of terrible famine, a ruinous and indefensible forced sale of grain²⁴ was imposed on Campania that would have pushed the province into destitution, I took up the fight against the Praetorian prefect for the good of all. I argued before the king himself against the enforcement of this edict—and I won.²⁵

“I rescued the former consul Paulinus from the very jaws of the palace dogs who would have devoured him, as they had already devoured his wealth in their ambitious greed. And then, to keep Albinus, also a former consul, safe from the judgment of those who would have condemned him without trial, I earned the hatred of his accuser Cyprian.²⁶

“Doesn’t it seem like I have stirred up enough raging anger against myself? But shouldn’t I in doing so have made myself more secure among those outside the royal court²⁷ since my love of justice caused me to show no favor to those at court to make myself safer there?

“Who are the informers, then, who have brought me low? One was Basilius, a man previously dismissed from royal service, who was forced to denounce me because of his debts. Then there were Opilio and Gaudentius.²⁸ A decree had gone out from the king sentencing them both to exile for their countless frauds, but they sought sanctuary in a holy temple.²⁹ When the king found out, he ordered them to leave Ravenna before the appointed day or else have brands burned into their foreheads and then be driven from the city. What could be a harsher acknowledgment of their guilt than that? Yet on that

very day, those same men made an accusation against me, and their denunciation was accepted. Tell me, did my actions merit that? Did my prearranged conviction somehow turn these accusers into just men? Shouldn't Fortune have been ashamed, if not because an innocent man was accused, then at least because the accusers were so vile?

"Do you want to know what the heart of the accusation against me is? It's that I desired the safety of the Senate. And do you want to know how I did that? By trying to prevent an informer from bringing forward documents claiming the Senate was guilty of treason.

"And so, my teacher, what do you think? Should I deny the charge to avoid causing you shame? But I *did* want the Senate to be safe, and I always will. Should I confess, then? But the effort to stop the informer has ended. Shall I say instead it was wrong to want to protect the Senate? Indeed, the Senate by its own decree against me has declared it wrong.³⁰ But such foolishness, always lying to itself, cannot change the merit of anything. I must follow the teaching of Socrates to neither hide the truth nor be a party to falsehood.³¹ But I leave it to your judgment and that of other wise people to decide what is right. I have recorded with my pen the truth of this whole matter and the sequence of events so that they might be remembered and not forgotten by future generations.

"And concerning those false letters in which I supposedly argued for the freedom of the Roman people, what more is there to say? It would have been obvious they were frauds if I had been allowed to use the confessions of my accusers—always the most powerful defense in such matters. But what liberty can be hoped for now? How I wish there were some

hope. If so, I would have responded using the same words as Canius, who, when Caligula accused him of participating in a plot against him, said, ‘If *I* had known about it, *you* would not.’

“In all this my wits are not so dulled by grief that I merely whine about wicked men seeking to do evil deeds against the good. What astounds me is that they actually get what they wish for. We may grant that it’s a common human failing to have evil desires, but for every evil man to be able to carry out his plans against the innocent while God looks on is simply monstrous. It’s not without reason that one of your followers wondered: ‘If God exists, where does evil come from? But then, where does good come from if he doesn’t?’³²

“It is understandable if wicked men who seek the blood of all good people and the Senate should seek to destroy me too, since they saw me fighting for good men and for the Senate. But surely I didn’t deserve the same treatment from the senators themselves! You’ll remember, I think—since you were always by my side directing me whenever I was about to say or do anything—again I say, you’ll remember that when at Verona³³ the king, who was eager to destroy the whole Senate, tried to expand the charge of treason against Albinus to include all the senators, I defended the innocence of the whole Senate with no thought for my own safety. You know that I am speaking the truth, since in no way do I ever try to praise myself. For whenever someone boasts of what he did and earns some reward, by that much in praising himself he diminishes the hidden benefits to his conscience.

“But now you see the result of my innocence. Instead of a reward for true virtue, I am punished for a crime I didn’t commit. And in what sort of crime did even a full confession ever

merit judges so united in their severity that none of them could be swayed by the fallibility of human nature or by the unpredictability of Fortune common to all mortals? If I had been accused of burning down holy temples or slitting the throats of priests with an unholy sword or plotting the slaughter of all good citizens, I would have at least been allowed to be present at my sentencing after I had confessed or been convicted. But here I am, nearly five hundred miles away,³⁴ silenced and unable to defend myself, condemned to death and my property confiscated, all for being too zealous in my support of the Senate. How they richly deserve that no one else will ever be convicted on a similar charge!

“Even those who invented this accusation could see the dignity it gave me, and so to blacken my standing they lyingly added the wicked claim that in my ambition for high office, I had defiled myself by indulging in sorcery.³⁵ But you yourself dwell deep within my spirit and have driven out any desire for earthly things. Under your gaze there is certainly no place for unholy arts. For you instilled every day into my ears and mind that saying of Pythagoras: ‘Follow God.’³⁶ It would not at all be appropriate for me to seek the help of the vilest of spirits when you raised me up in excellence to become like God. Beyond this, my blameless life in the sanctuary of my home, my companionship with the most honorable of friends, my father-in-law (a man as worthy of reverence as you) all defend me from any suspicion of this charge.

“But—and, oh, this is evil—those accusers gain credibility for their unholy charge because you and I seem in this supposed sorcery³⁷ to be allies, since I am so deeply immersed in your teachings and established in your ways.³⁸ And so it isn’t

enough that my reverence for you has done me no good, but now you too are being torn apart because of the attack on me.

“To add to all my troubles is the fact that the opinion of most people isn’t formed by the merit of a case but by how chance makes it unfold. They judge that things turn out well for us only when we have acted rightly. Thus it is the good reputation we have in the eyes of everyone that vanishes first. It pains me to think about the rumors that are spreading about me now, and how varied and contradictory popular opinion must be. I would say the ultimate burden of misfortune is that wretched people are believed to deserve what they suffer, even when the charges against them are baseless. And so it is with me, deprived of my possessions, stripped of my honors, my reputation in ruins. I am punished for having done good.

“I seem to see the evil workshops of wicked men overflowing with joy and happiness. I see every scoundrel threatening new false denunciations. I see good people cast down on the ground trembling at what has happened to me. I see all the criminals encouraged to commit wicked deeds without fear of punishment, and indeed encouraged by rewards to do them. All this has happened while the innocent are deprived not only of their safety but also of their defense. And so I cry out:

A Prayer and a Response

“O Creator of the starry heavens,
seated on your enduring throne,
you spin the swiftly turning sky,
you compel the stars to submit to laws,
so that now shining with crescent full,³⁹

reflecting all the light of her brother,⁴⁰
the moon hides the lesser stars.
And now dim with her crescent fading,
she loses her light as she draws nearer to Phoebus.
And now as evening twilight begins,
Hesperus⁴¹ sinking cold in the night,
and now changing its accustomed role
to Lucifer, pales before Phoebus rising.
You in the cold of leaf-shedding winter
make shorter the brief daylight.
You, when blazing summer comes,
hasten the swift hours of the night.
Your power brings order to the changing year,
so that the leaves the North Wind bears away
the West Wind gently returns.
The seeds that Arcturus looked down on,
Sirius dries as fields of ripe grain.⁴²
Nothing disobeys the ancient law
by abandoning its post and proper order.
But you—who rules all things with a sure purpose—
refuse to rein in human deeds,
you, the master of all.
How is it that slippery Fortune
can cause such ruin?
Punishment owed to the wicked
crushes the innocent instead.
Now evil men in strange reversal
sit high on the throne, grinding the necks
of the innocent beneath their feet.
Virtue hides in the shadows, the just man

bears the blame of the wicked.
Their perjuries do not harm them,
nor does their fraud dressed in colorful lies.
But when it amuses them to use their power,
they rejoice to overthrow great kings
whom countless people fear.
Look down on this wretched earth—
whoever you are who binds the world with law—
and know that we humans tossed about on Fortune's
waves
are no small part of this great world.
Helmsman, calm the rushing waves of the sea,
and as you rule the vast heavens above,
make firm by steady law the earth below.”⁴³

While I was bawling all this out in continual lament,⁴⁴ Philosophy looked on me with a serene face, unmoved by my complaints.

Then she spoke: “When I saw you grief-stricken and full of tears, I knew immediately that you were a pitiable exile, but until you began to speak I had no idea how distant your banishment was. How far from your homeland you are! But you have not been expelled—no, you have wandered off all on your own. If you prefer to think that you have been exiled, then it is rather you who have exiled yourself, for no one else has that kind of power over you. Do you even remember your own homeland? It is not ruled by the decisions of the multitude as Athens once was, but in that place ‘there is one commander, one king,’⁴⁵ who delights in the company of his subjects, not in driving them out. To be led by his hand and to

submit yourself to his justice is the highest liberty.⁴⁶ Do you not know the most ancient law of your city, the law that says anyone who has chosen to make his home there can never be banished? The one who lives within the walls and fortifications of that city need not fear that he will ever merit exile. But anyone who no longer wishes to live there ceases to deserve such assurance.

“And so it isn’t the look of this place that moves me so much as your own appearance. I don’t need a library decorated with ivory and glass as much as I do a seat in your mind. That is where I have stored up not books but that which gives books their value—the ideas of mine that they contain.

“You have spoken rightly about your services for the common good, and indeed you could have said much more. You have talked about the truthfulness—or rather untruthfulness—of all the charges brought against you. And you were right that you only needed to touch briefly on the wicked crimes and lies of those who accused you, since they are told better and more fully by the common crowd, who always find out about everything. You have also bemoaned passionately the injustice of the Senate. And of course you lamented the charges made against me and wept for the damage done to my reputation. Finally your anger burned brightly against unjust Fortune, and you railed against rewards not being equal to merits. And then, at the end of your raging verses, you wished for the peace that rules the heavens to reign on earth as well.

“Since such a storm of passions has besieged you, and since grief, anger, and sorrow are dragging you in different directions—for that is the sorry state of mind you are in—you

can't yet be given stronger medicines. Thus, for a time I will use gentler remedies so that your tumorous wound, swollen hard from confusing emotions rushing in, might soften by my touch and make you ready to accept more powerful treatments.

Gentle Medicine

“When Cancer burns heavy⁴⁷
with the bright rays of Phoebus,
then the one trusting seeds
to unreceiving furrows,
disappointed in Ceres’s gift,
must seek acorns under oaks.⁴⁸
You would never look to gather violets
when the groves darken
and the moaning fields are tossed
by the fierce North Wind.
Nor would you try with greedy hand
to prune the vines in spring
if you want to enjoy their grapes,
for it is in autumn
that Bacchus⁴⁹ grants his gifts.
God marks out the seasons,
giving proper duties to each,
and he does not allow
that which he has fixed to be disturbed.
Whatever abandons that certain order
down a headlong path tumbles
and does not find a happy end.

“Will you first allow me to ask a few questions to examine⁵⁰ and test your state of mind, so that I might judge what cure is best for you?”

“Ask what you think is best,” I said, “and I will answer whatever you wish.”

“Do you think,” she asked, “that this world is ruled by random and chance events, or do you believe some reason guides it?”

“There is no way,” I said, “that I would ever believe this world of such order is governed by random chance. Indeed I know that God the creator presides over his own work. There will never come a day when I will believe this is not the truth.”

“Yes,” she replied, “this is what you were saying just a little while ago when you deplored that humans alone are not under divine care. Concerning the rest of the world, you had no doubt at all that they were governed by reason. How strange! I’m amazed that you are sick at all given your grounding in such a healthy belief. Truly we must examine this more deeply. I think there is something missing here. Tell me, since you don’t doubt that the world is ruled by God, what do you think are the means by which he guides it?”⁵¹

“I can hardly understand your question,” I said, “much less answer it.”

“So I wasn’t deceived, was I,” she said, “in thinking something was missing? It’s as if some disease had crept into your troubled mind as through a crack in a strong wall. But tell me, if you remember, what is the end of all things, the goal to which all nature strives?”

“I heard it once,” I replied, “but grief has blunted my memory.”

“Do you know, then, the source from which all things come?”

“I know,” I said, and answered that it was God.

“And how can it be that you know the beginning of things but not their end? Indeed, this is the power of confusing emotions, that they’re able to move a man from his position but aren’t able to knock him down completely and uproot him from himself. But answer me this—do you remember that you’re a human being?”

“How could I not remember that?”

“And what is a human being? Are you able to say?”

“Are you asking me if I know I’m a rational and mortal animal? Yes, I do know it and admit that’s what I am.”

Then she asked, “Are you sure that you’re nothing more?”

“Nothing.”

“Now I know the other and most serious cause of your disease. You have forgotten what you are. Now I know fully the reason for your illness and the remedy to restore you to health. Because you are so confused by forgetfulness, you lamented that you were an exile and have lost all your goods. And because you don’t know the end and purpose of things, you think that wicked people are powerful and happy. And finally, because you have forgotten by what means the world is controlled, you think that the ups and downs of Fortune happen without anyone guiding events. These problems are great enough to cause not only disease but even death. Still, you should give thanks to the author of health that your true nature has not yet abandoned you.

“We still have the best kindling for your health—your true opinion about the governance of the world, for you believe it

is ruled not by random chance but by divine reason. So do not be afraid. Soon this tiny spark of life-giving heat will burst into flame. But since it's not yet time for stronger remedies, and since it is the nature of the mind to clothe itself in false beliefs when it has abandoned true ones, I will try for a little while to clear away this fog with milder and gentler medicines, so that with the shadows of false beliefs driven away, you will be able to see the glory of true light.

The Dangers of Emotion

“Stars⁵² hidden
by black clouds
cannot shine forth
with any light.
The raging South Wind
rolling the sea
stirs up a storm,
clear just before,
like calm days
peaceful and serene,
but suddenly shaken
and thick with mud,
and blocks our sight.
The stream that wanders
from the high mountains
flowing down
often is stopped
by barriers of rock
loosed from a cliff.

You too, if you want
to see the truth
in a clear light
and begin the journey
on a straight path,
drive away pleasure,
drive away fear,
rid yourself of hope,
and make no room for sorrow.
Cloudy is the mind
and bound in chains
where these rule.”