

Selections from Boethius, *On the Consolation of Philosophy*

I.3

In such a manner were the clouds of grief scattered. Then I drew breath again and engaged my mind in taking knowledge of my physician's countenance. So when I turned my eyes towards her and fixed my gaze upon her, I recognised my nurse, Philosophy, in whose chambers I had spent my life from earliest manhood. And I asked her, 'Wherefore have you, mistress of all virtues, come down from heaven above to visit my lonely place of banishment? Is it that you, as well as I, may be harried, the victim of false charges?'

'Should I,' said she, 'desert you, my nursling? Should I not share and bear my part of the burden which has been laid upon you from spite against my name? Surely Philosophy never allowed herself to let the innocent go upon their journey unbefriended. Think you I would fear calumnies? that I would be terrified as though they were a new misfortune? Think you that this is the first time that wisdom has been harassed by dangers among men of shameless ways? In ancient days before the time of my child, Plato, have we not as well as nowadays fought many a mighty battle against the recklessness of folly? And though Plato did survive, did not his master, Socrates, win his victory of an unjust death, with me present at his side? When after him the followers of Epicurus, and in turn the Stoics, and then others did all try their utmost to seize his legacy, they dragged me, for all my cries and struggles, as though to share me as plunder; they tore my robe which I had woven with mine own hands, and snatched away the fragments thereof: and when they thought I had altogether yielded myself to them, they departed. And since among them were to be seen certain signs of my outward bearing, others ill-advised did think they wore my livery: thus were many of them undone by the errors of the herd of uninitiated. But if you have not heard of the exile of Anaxagoras, nor the poison drunk by Socrates, nor the torture of Zeno, which all were of foreign lands, yet you may know of Canius, Seneca, and Soranus, whose fame is neither small nor passing old. Naught else brought them to ruin but that, being built up in my ways, they appeared at variance with the desires of unscrupulous men. So it is no matter for your wonder if, in this sea of life, we are tossed about by storms from all sides; for to oppose evil men is the chief aim we set before ourselves. Though the band of such men is great in numbers, yet is it to be contemned: for it is guided by no leader, but is hurried along at random only by error running riot everywhere. If this band when warring against us presses too strongly upon us, our leader, Reason, gathers her forces into her citadel, while the enemy are busied in plundering useless baggage. As they seize the most worthless things, we laugh at them from above, untroubled by the whole band of mad marauders, and we are defended by that rampart to which riotous folly may not hope to attain.'

II.2

"If Plenty with o'erflowing horn scatter her wealth abroad, abundantly, as in the storm-tossed sea the sand is cast around, or so beyond all measure as the stars shine forth upon the studded sky in cloudless nights; though she never stay her hand, yet will the race of men still weep and wail. Though God accept their prayers freely and give gold with ungrudging hand, and deck with honours

those who deserve them, yet when they are gotten, these gifts seem naught. Wild greed swallows what it has sought, and still gapes wide for more. What bit or bridle will hold within its course this headlong lust, when, whetted by abundance of rich gifts, the thirst for possession burns? Never call we that man rich who is ever trembling in haste and groaning for that he thinks he lacks."

II.4

Then I answered her, 'Cherisher of all the virtues, you tell me but the truth: I cannot deny my rapid successes and my prosperity. But it is such remembrances that torment me more than others. For of all suffering from Fortune, the unhappiest misfortune is to have known a happy fortune.'

'But,' said Philosophy, 'you are paying the penalty for your mistaken expectations, and with this you cannot justly charge your life's circumstances. If you are affected by this empty name of Fortune's gift of happiness, you must listen while I recall how many and how great are your sources of happiness: and thus, if you have possessed that which is the most precious among all Fortune's gifts, and if that is still safe and unharmed in your possession, you will never, while you keep these better gifts, be able to justly charge Fortune with unkindness. Firstly, your wife's father, Symmachus, is still living and hale; and what more precious glory has the human race than him? And he, because your worth is undiminished and your life still so valuable, is mourning for the injustice you suffer, this man who is wholly made up of wisdom and virtue. Again, your wife lives, a woman whose character is full of virtue, whose modesty excels its kind; a woman who (to put in a word the gifts she brought you) is like her father. She lives, and, hating this life, for your sake alone she clings to it. Herein only will I yield to allow you unhappiness; she pines with tears and grief through her longing for you. Need I speak of your sons who have both been consuls, and whose lives, as when they were boys, are yet bright with the character of their grandfather and their father? Wherefore, since mortals desire exceedingly to keep a hold on life, how happy you should be, knew you but your blessings, since you have still what none doubts to be dearer than life itself? Wherefore now dry your tears. Fortune's hatred has not yet been so great as to destroy all your holds upon happiness: the tempest that is fallen upon you is not too great for you: your anchors hold yet firm, and they should keep ever nigh to you confidence in the present and hope for future time.'

'And may they continue to hold fast,' said I, 'that is my prayer: while they are firm, we will reach the end of our voyage, however things may be. But you see how much my glory has departed.'

And she answered, 'We have made some progress, if you are not now weary entirely of your present lot. But I cannot bear this dallying so softly, so long as you complain that your happiness lacks aught, so long as you are full of sorrow and care. Whose happiness is so firmly established that he has no quarrel from any side with his estate of life? For the condition of our welfare is a matter fraught with care: either its completeness never appears, or it never remains. One man's wealth is abundant, but his birth and breeding put him to shame. Another is famous for his noble birth, but would rather be unknown because he is hampered by his narrow means. A third is blessed with wealth and breeding, but bewails his life because he has no wife. Another is happy in his marriage, but has no children, and saves his wealth only for an heir that is no son of his. Another is blessed

with children, but weeps tears of sorrow for the misdeeds of son or daughter. So none is readily at peace with the lot his fortune sends him. For in each case there is that which is unknown to him who has not experienced it, and which brings horror to him who has experienced it. Consider further, that the feelings of the most fortunate men are the most easily affected, wherefore, unless all their desires are supplied, such men, being unused to all adversity, are cast down by every little care: so small are the troubles which can rob them of complete happiness.

'How many are they, think you, who would think themselves raised to heaven if the smallest part of the remnants of your good fortune fell to them? This very place, which you call a place of exile, is home to those who live herein. Thus there is nothing wretched unless you think it to be so: and in like manner he who bears all with a calm mind finds his lot wholly blessed. Who is so happy but would wish to change his estate, if he yields to impatience of his lot? With how much bitterness is the sweetness of man's life mingled! For even though its enjoyment seem pleasant, yet it may not be surely kept from departing when it will. It is plain then how wretched is the happiness of mortal life which neither endures for ever with men of calm mind, nor ever wholly delights the care-ridden. Wherefore, then, O mortal men, seek ye that happiness without, which lies within yourselves? Ye are confounded by error and ignorance. I will shew you as shortly as I may, the pole on which turns the highest happiness. Is there aught that you value more highly than your own self? You will answer that there is nothing. If then you are master of yourself, you will be in possession of that which you will never wish to lose, and which Fortune will never be able to take from you. Yet consider this further, that you may be assured that happiness cannot be fixed in matters of chance: if happiness is the highest good of a man who lives his life by reason, and if that which can by any means be snatched away, is not the highest good (since that which is best cannot be snatched away), it is plain that Fortune by its own uncertainty can never come near to reaching happiness. Further, the man who is borne along by a happiness which may stumble, either knows that it may change, or knows it not: if he knows it not, what happiness can there be in the blindness of ignorance? If he knows it, he must needs live in fear of losing that which he cannot doubt that he may lose; wherefore an ever-present fear allows not such an one to be happy. Or at any rate, if he lose it without unhappiness, does he not think it worthless? For that, whose loss can be calmly borne, is indeed a small good. You, I know well, are firmly persuaded that men's understandings can never die; this truth is planted deep in you by many proofs: since then it is plain that the happiness of fortune is bounded by the death of the body, you cannot doubt that, if death can carry away happiness, the whole race of mortals is sinking into wretchedness to be found upon the border of death. But we know that many have sought the enjoyment of happiness not only by death, but even by sorrow and sufferings: how then can the presence of this life make us happy, when its end cannot make us unhappy?'

III.3

'Though the rich man with greed heap up from ever-flowing streams the wealth that cannot satisfy, though he deck himself with pearls from the Red Sea's shore, and plough his fertile field with oxen by the score, yet gnawing care will never in his lifetime leave him, and at his death his wealth will not go with him, but leave him faithlessly.'