

follows age. "He who is unwilling to die never wanted to live, for life is given to us with death as a precondition. Death is where we are headed, and for that reason one would be mad to fear it. It is uncertainty that frightens us; when things are certain, we simply await them. <sup>11</sup> Death is a requirement that is imposed equitably and unavoidably. Who can complain about being under the same restrictions as everyone else? The first element in equity is equality.

"But I need not plead nature's case at this time. It is not nature's will that we should have any law but its own: what it has assembled, it breaks down; and what it breaks down, it assembles again. <sup>12</sup> If it should happen that old age releases a person gently, not tearing him suddenly away from life but letting him slip away gradually, then that person should give thanks to all the gods. He should indeed, for he had his fill before being taken to his rest, a rest that is necessary for mortal beings, and welcome to the weary.\*"

"You see some who long to die, who indeed insist on it more firmly than people usually ask to live. I don't know which ones I find more inspiring: those who ask for death or those who meet death with calm cheerfulness. For such requests sometimes come of madness or some sudden fit of outrage, while such tranquility comes of a settled judgment. There are people who come to death out of anger; there is no one who sees death coming to him and offers it a cheerful welcome, unless that person has been long resigned to it."

<sup>13</sup> So I have to confess that although I had many reasons to visit Bassus often (he is after all a dear friend), I wanted in particular to see whether I would find him the same each time: would his mental energy diminish as his body grew weaker? But it kept growing, just as one often sees excitement building in a chariot team when it is in the seventh lap, with the palms of victory in sight. <sup>14</sup> In fact, he used to say, in conformity with Epicurus's teachings, "First of all, I hope there will be no pain in that last breath, but if there is, it will be short, and that itself is some comfort. For severe pain is never of long duration. \* But if there is torment in the moment when mind separates from body, I will console myself thus: after that pain, I can no longer experience pain. For no doubt my aged breath is only barely clinging to my lips and needs no great force to draw it from my body. A fire that is well supplied with fuel needs water to put it

out and sometimes the collapse of the entire building; one that has exhausted its fuel gives out of its own accord."

<sup>15</sup> My dear Lucilius, I am glad to listen to these words. It's not as if they were new, but it is as if they have become a present reality to me. Why? Have I not watched many people reach their life's end? Yes, I have, but they make a greater impression on me when they come to death with no hatred for life, when they let death in rather than reaching for it.

<sup>16</sup> In fact, he used to say that the torment we feel comes about through our own agency, because we become alarmed when we believe that death is close at hand. But isn't it close to everyone, ready in every place and every moment? "Let us keep in mind," he said, "that in the moment when some cause of death seems to be drawing near, there are others, even nearer, that we don't fear. A man had received a death threat from an enemy—and a digestive ailment got there first.

<sup>17</sup> If we are willing to draw some distinctions among the causes of our fear, we will find that some are real, others only apparent. It is not death we fear but the thought of death, for death itself is always the same distance away from us. So if death is ever to be feared, it is to be feared at all times. For what time is there that is not subject to death?"

<sup>18</sup> But I should be afraid that you will hate such long letters even worse than death! So I'll stop. As for you, if you want never to be afraid of death, think about it always.

Farewell.

## Letter 31

*From Seneca to Lucilius*

*Greetings*

<sup>1</sup> I recognize my Lucilius! He is beginning to make good on his promises. Keep it up! For you had the force of character to pursue every excellence, trampling underfoot the goods that are popularly esteemed. Great and good as I want you to be, it is no more than you were striving for. The foundations you have laid cover a wide area;



in a freedman or even a slave as in a Roman of equestrian status.\* For what is a Roman equestrian, or a freedman, or a slave? Those are names born of ambition or of unfair treatment. One may leap up to heaven even from a chimney corner. Rise, then,

and shape yourself as well into a likeness worthy of godhead.

But you will not make that likeness from gold or silver: from such materials no likeness can be made that truly resembles God. Bear in mind that in the days when the gods were well disposed, their images were of clay.\* Farewell.

## Letter 32

*From Seneca to Lucilius*

*Greetings*

1 I have been making inquiries about you. Every time someone comes through here from your vicinity, I ask what you are doing, and where you spend your time and with whom. You can't fool me! I am right with you. Live as if I were sure to hear about everything you do—no, to see it!

Are you wondering what pleases me the most out of everything I hear about you? It is that I hear nothing at all—that most of those whom I question do not know how you are doing.<sup>2</sup> This is beneficial, to have nothing to do with those who are unlike you, whose desires are different from yours. Indeed, I am confident that you cannot be turned aside and will persist in your intention, even if crowds of bothersome people surround you.

What, then, is the issue? I am not afraid that they will change you, but I am afraid that they will hinder you. Even he who delays you does great harm, especially since life is so short. And we make it even shorter by our inconsistency, when we make one fresh start after another. We tear it to bits, we shred it.

3 Make haste, then, dearest Lucilius, and think how much more

speed you would put on if an enemy were pursuing you from behind—hind—if you saw mounted horsemen coming up from behind you, harrying your retreat. That is, in fact, what is happening; you are being pursued. Put on speed! Make your escape; get yourself to safety. Remind yourself often how fine a thing it is to reach the summit of life before you die, and then to be in peace as you wait out the remainder of your time, relying only on yourself.\* For once one possesses happiness, duration does not make it any happier.<sup>4</sup> Ah, when will the day come when you will realize that time doesn't matter for you, and will be at peace, caring nothing for the future, completely satisfied with what you are! Would you like to know what it is that makes people greedy for the future? Not one of them yet belongs to himself.

There were other things your parents wished for you to have, what I wish is for you to have contempt for all their bountiful wishes. In their prayers, many are robbed to make you rich: whatever they transfer to you, they must take from someone else.<sup>5</sup> My wish is this: may you be your own master; may your mind, which is now driven this way and that by its concerns, come at last to a halt, sure and content in itself; may you come to understand those true goods that belong to you in the moment you understand them, and so feel no need of additional years. In order to rise above necessities, to gain one's discharge, to be free, one must live a life that is already complete. Farewell.

## Letter 33

*From Seneca to Lucilius*

*Greetings*

1 You request that I should close these letters, as I did the earlier ones, with quotations, and that I should take them from the leaders of our own school. They did not busy themselves with flowery bits of speech: their entire fabric is masculine.\* Where what is noteworthy strands out from the rest, you can be sure the quality is uneven. A single tree excites no wonder when the entire forest rises to the same height.

further than they intended by the momentum of their bodies, so this rapidity of speech is not in command of itself and not well suited to philosophy. Philosophy ought to place its words, not spew them out; it should go forward one step at a time.

8 "What do you mean? Shouldn't it sometimes take wing?" Of course it should—but in such a way as to preserve its dignified character. Excessive vehemence strips that away. Philosophy should have great strength, but a strength that is under control; it should be an ever-flowing stream, not a flood.

I would scarcely permit even an advocate to use such a rapid rate of speech. For it forges ahead without discipline and cannot be called back. How is the juror to follow it? Especially since jurors are sometimes inexperienced and untrained. Even when the advocate is eager to show off or is carried away by his emotions, he should restrict his pace and his accumulation of ideas to what the ear can take in.

9 You will be right, then, to disregard those who care about how much they say rather than how well, and to prefer, if you must, to speak haltingly, like Publius Vinicius.° When someone asked Asellus how Vinicius's speech went, he said, "Bit by bit." For as Geminius Varius said, "I don't know how you can call that man an orator; he can't string three words together."\* Yet why should you not choose to speak as Vinicius does? 10 So what if some jokester comes your way like the one that heard Vinicius when he was groping for words as if he were dictating rather than speaking, and said to him, "Say, are you going to say something?" For although Quintus Haterius was highly renowned as an orator in his day, his swift speaking is just what I would want the person of sense to avoid.\* He never hesitated, never took a breath; he began but once, and left off only at the end.

11 I suppose also that some things are either more or less suited to certain peoples. In Greece you would put up with such license; we Romans make it a habit to put in the punctuation, even when we write.\* Cicero too, the wellspring of our Roman eloquence, went forward one step at a time. Roman speech has more circumspection; it sets a value on itself, and lets others make their assessment as well. 12 Fabianus was a fine man both in his manner of living and in his depth of knowledge, and eloquent as well, although that is of lesser importance.\* He used to lecture efficiently rather than energetically.

One could say that he exhibited a facility with language, but not that he had great speed of delivery. I allow that this may be a characteristic of the man of wisdom, though I do not make it a requirement. By all means, let his speech issue forth without impediment. But it is one thing to deliver, another to gush; I prefer delivery.

13 Another reason I have to dissuade you from that contagion is that you cannot employ that style of speaking except by losing your sense of shame. You have to coarsen your sensibilities and never listen to yourself. That heedless dash will bring with it many expressions that you would wish to criticize. 14 I repeat: you cannot achieve it without losing your sense of propriety.

Besides that, you need to practice every day, and that means putting your energy into the words rather than the content. And even if a rapid flow of words comes easily to you, requiring no effort, still you should keep it in check. For just as a man of wisdom should be modest in his manner of walking, so should his speech be restrained, not impetuous.

The sum of all my summing up, and my command, is this: speak slowly.

Farewell.

## Letter 41

From Seneca to Lucilius

Greetings

1 You are doing what is best and most beneficial for you if, as your letter says, you persevere in moving toward excellence of mind. How silly ~~it is to pray for that!~~ It is a wish you yourself can grant.

You need not raise your hands to heaven; you need not beg the temple keeper for privileged access, as if a near approach to the cult image would give us a better hearing. The god is near you—with you—inside you. 2 I mean it, Lucilius. A sacred spirit dwells within us, and is the observer and guardian of all our goods and ills. However we treat that spirit, so does the spirit treat us. In truth, no one is a good man without God. Or is there anyone who can rise superior

to fortune without God's aid? It is God who supplies us with noble thoughts, with upright counsels. In each and every good man

resides a god: which god, remains unknown.\*

3 If you happen to be in a wood dense with ancient trees of unusual height, where interlocking branches exclude the light of day, the loftiness and seclusion of that forest spot, the wonder of finding above ground such a deep, unbroken shade, will convince you that divinity is there. If you behold some deeply eroded cavern, some vast chamber not made with hands but hollowed out by natural causes at the very roots of the mountain, it will impress upon your mind an intimation of religious awe. We venerate the sources of great rivers; we situate an altar wherever a rushing stream bursts suddenly from hiding; thermal springs are the site of ritual observance; and more than one lake has been held sacred for its darkness or its measureless depth. 4 So if you see a person undismayed by peril and untouched by desire, one cheerful in adversity and calm in the face of storms, someone who rises above all humankind and meets the gods at their own level, will you not be overcome with reverence before him?

Will you not say, "Something is there that is so great, so exalted, that we cannot possibly believe it to be of the same kind as that paltry body it inhabits." 5 A power divine has descended on him. That eminent and disciplined mind, passing through everything as lesser than itself, laughing at all our fears and all our longings, is driven by some celestial force. Such magnitude cannot stand upright without divinity to hold it up. In large part, then, its existence is in that place from which it has come down. Even as the sun's rays touch the earth and yet have their existence at their point of origin, so that great and sacred mind, that mind sent down to bring us nearer knowledge of the divine, dwells indeed with us and yet inheres within its source. Its reliance is there, and there are its aim and its objective: though it mingles in our affairs, it does so as our better.\*

6 So what mind is this? It is one that shines with a good that is its own. Do we praise a person for qualities belonging to someone else?

What could be sillier than that? Do we marvel at possessions that can be transferred to another at a moment's notice? What could be more foolish? A golden bridle does not improve the horse. The tamed lion with his gold-encrusted mane, harried into submission and loaded

down with trinkets, is goaded on by his handlers: how different is the spring of the wild lion, whose spirit is unbroken! Surely he, fierce in the attack, as nature intended—he, with his rugged splendor that has no ornament but in the terror of the beholder—is superior to that other languid, gilded creature!

7 No one should glory except in what is his own. We commend the vine only if its branches are laden with grapes, if it bears so heavily that the stakes cannot support it. Would anyone really prefer the vine that is hung with golden fruit and golden leaves? Fruitfulness is the distinctive excellence of the vine; similarly in a human being we should praise that which belongs to him. So what if he has attractive slaves, a lovely home, vast plantations, substantial investments? All these things surround him; they are not in him. 8 Praise in him that which nothing can take away and nothing can confer—that which is distinctive about the human being.\*

Do you ask what that is? It is the mind, and rationality perfected within the mind. For a human being is a rational animal. Hence his good is complete if he fulfills that for which he is born. But what is it that this rationality requires of him? The easiest thing of all: to live in accordance with his own nature. It is our shared insanity that makes this difficult: we push one another into faults. And how can we be recalled to health, when all people drive us forward and no one holds us back?

Farewell.