

Exordium, or Parodos or parodos

No, it is not necessary for you to read this, it is merely an introduction, but, whether you read it or not, I figure here, and that is important.

I came across three poets, Calvus, Cinna and Catullus behind Apollo's Temple, where I hang around. They found some of Epicurus' ideals, the maximisation of pleasure, to their liking. And scandals. And gay abandon. And wine. Just as I do.

As becomes every poet, the three were, by inclination, philosophers, just like me. Of course, not everybody sees life the same way as they did. Many people don't even look, ignore joys and matters of gravity - and let them pass by. Levity is preferred by many. Is it possible profundity suffers?

I discussed this with Cerebrianus, Relativorius and Apticus. Consensorius couldn't be part of the discussion group. "I am busy at the Temple of Consensus, my chosen God. I am trying to get disagreeing people see each others' points of view," he told me. Suada, Goddess of Persuasion, what a profession he chose!

"Doesn't Myopus, the God of Shortsightedness and the other God, the one of Unintended Consequences, interfere with your tasks?" I asked him, because these Gods interfere with the sacred tasks of legislators as well; Senators blame them, when their laws don't have the effect on those they have formulated them for.

Consensorius had an answer. "I, and your poets, found it astounding, how different people are, but, when compared with chairs, sandals, or the moon, it's miraculously obvious how similar they are. People, with the rarest exception, have a temper, misconceptions and pleasures. And one characteristic seems unchangeable, when there's nothing else to do, what's left is philosophy and wine."

I objected, because I simply observe; that's why I don't figure. "I fetched well at the auctions." He wanted to know my price. "My price? No, none of your business, we all have our price. But when you have a price, your importance dwindles. Me too. Mine too. So I don't figure. But let me tell you ..." but he wasn't interested.

Cerebrianus had to have his input. "These are days of change. Before, almost everyone knew his, her or their place. Now, horizons are fuzzed. People mingle. People are mingled, whether they want to or not. Women are made equal, against the wishes of the Gods, of course. Against their nature. Men suffer. Women too. Some don't know what they are."

Relativorius agreed with him. "Mirrors could work wonders, but they reflect surfaces, which can and are altered, so beholders see only what he, she, it, *et cetera* wants to see. Opting-out is much easier, and conforming to individuality can be claimed."

Such fashionable virtues.

Apticus had his addendum. "Once it was simple, you had duties. Now, we got rights. Some heavy philosopher thought that rights are synonymous with freedom, but it's confusing. Fortunately, this doesn't concern us and worries even fewer, because popularly elected politicians have begun to think for most people. Politicians have always known everything, only the rest of us have to learn every day. It takes your responsibility to think away and shifts it to those better qualified."

I could not accept this. "You can't agree with politicians on everything."

"Plutus, God of Wealth, can't you see it? Guaranteed freedom to disagree comes with the free dole."

"The Roman Way is best," Apticus insisted. "Proof? We conquered the world, didn't we? Our Gods and Goddesses are superior to everyone else's."

Cerebrianus objected. "Now, in our enlightened and modern times, we don't need Gods and Goddesses, don't have to hold or salve them, we're rich enough to do without. Our politicians have promised suitable solutions for the remaining problems, and the God for Unintended Consequences will never prevail against their astuteness." He cleared his throat, then complained. "My his hunting dogs won't chase the way they used to."

At least I could explain this problem. "Nowadays men don't obey or respect Gods. Wives don't obey or respect husbands. Students don't obey or respect teachers. Children don't obey or respect parents. Nobody obeys or respects politicians. And dogs? Why put all obeying and respecting onto them? Every dog needs his freedom." I think he understood.

Apticus had to butt in. "And what's your story?"

I tried to put it together. "Nobody unfamiliar with the hunt can know the joy of wading through swamps, without knowing what game is waiting. But Gods sell humans joy, at the price of work and the hunt leads through the unexpected. It's easy to get lost."

Relativorius put it into context, because I was confused. "I'll show you how events hang together. The Fates, the Spinner, the Holder and the Snipper of the Yarns of Lives, are no mysteries. If you are fuzzy about dates, forget birthdays and anniversaries; don't worry. Getting older or counting birthdays doesn't count; better gather wisdom. Birthdays are milestones, enjoy your next one, sit on it, contemplate it and your surrounds."

Apticus didn't let up on me either. "Being fuzzy with dates, newfangled calendars or fanciful time devices doesn't matter. Historians forever disagree when or how what happened. They want to argue with each other, but key event were never fixed in precise winks, and a wink is precisely a third of a tercia, which is a sixtieth of a second, which in turn is

a sixtieth of a minute; and root causes are nebulous. If you've mixed up dates, apologise. Don't let it confuse you and don't confuse me with them."

I am already confused, but let me tell you what gets under my *capricorn*
...

Prologue

“Boom, boom, boom.” Great drums beat; rowers obeyed their rhythm. The barque moved slowly up the Nile. Here, people were darker than in Thebes, but colour difference means nothing to the Invisible God. Ankhhotepsenusrenetjertamen sat impressively garbed under the turquoise baldachin, as befits the High Priest of the God of Gods. Blue, the colour of invisibility, was dominant in Amen’s Cult.

It was late afternoon, mealtime; High Priests eat before Re, God of the Sun, dips over the horizon in his barque, to commence his nocturnal underworld journey. Nine kinds of duck, four of geese, beef, buffalo, kid and lamb cuts, salads, vegetables, cucumbers, soft-boiled legumes and seasoning herbs were arranged on platters. Fruit and wine were always ready and a quern was constantly grinding. Nobody in Egypt went hungry. Corn was abundant, fish and fowl plentiful. Amen looked after his preferred country.

Clumps of floating reeds drifted by. The sails were furled; in the windless condition they were of no use. In the middle of the Nile, no gnat disturbed deliberation. Not wanting to eat whilst others stood, Ankhhotepsenusrenetjertamen bade his assistant priests to join him. It’s an old saying, that there is always food; only man doesn’t last. After offerings to the Principal God, the meal began. The priests remained silent. If they hadn’t been the High Priest’s guests, it wouldn’t have been so, but, when eating, they weren’t supposed to look at their host, lest it offend his Ka. A superior host should not be spoken to, unless he spoke; who could know what displeased him? Thousands of years ago, Ptahotep had formulated this rule: respond when your superior addresses you, and your words will please his heart.

The Ka encompasses a man’s three attributes, his Bai, soul; Ikh, bright spirit; and Ran, his given name. Contemplatively, the High Priest fondled the beaten gold amulet representing his Ka. At Syene, he had visited the famous Solstice Well on the day the Sun God reached his vertex and cast no shadow into the heliotrope well; it had been a day of colourful festivities. At Syene and Philae people pray to the All-seeing Sparrowhawk.

Upriver was the land of the letophages, next to the root-eaters, who dig for roots in nearby swamps. From there, it isn’t far to the seedeaters, who live off fruit when there aren’t enough seeds. Lions live there almost the whole year, but migrate with the rising Dog Star, when swamp mosquitoes make the place miserable.

The last Temple to be visited was in cynamolgeans’ land. These dog-milkers were long-bearded men and have large dogs. South of them,

Egyptian Gods were less popular. There, casuary-eaters hunt ostriches by imitating ostrich shrieks and herding them into canyons. Aethiopians call them platyrrhines, flat-noses, and feud with them. Further on live ichtyophages and creophages, dieting on fish and turtles, then akridophages, strange people, eating grasshoppers carried by southwest and west winds. Little was known about the troglodytes beyond; missionary activities that far upriver weren't popular.

Thebes had been the world's navel, the proper place for Amen, but the centre of the world had now shifted to Rome. The Ptolemaic Pharaohs' time would end and the centre of Amen's Cult needed to be relocated. After returning to Thebes from this last trip up the Nile, the High Priest would go to Rome; the future and all her promises were there. His Bai and Ikh would be with him and ensure Amen's success, but outside Egypt, his Ran was impractical. What name should Ankhhotepsenusrenetjertamen choose? He didn't think long. Flavonax, the nickname his boyhood fascination with herbs and spices had earned him, would do. This pseudonym and his knowledge of therapeutic plants and aromas were better than money; who could dispute knowledge? Gold could be stolen, understanding could not, and Flavonax had a good ring to it.

Ankhhotepsenusrenetjertamen was the fourth son of Sinuhamen, the head of Thebes' most ancient merchant house. The house dealt in Punt frankincense, Hadhramaut myrrh, white Chios mastix, spices and aromatics from wherever Egyptian ships sailed to; thus Flavonax had grown up amidst savours and flavours, mercantilistic hustle, caravans of camels and dhows, trade emissaries and pilgrims.

His forebears had always been adherents of the Invisible God. Every generation had given at least one son to Amen; an endless row of ancestral uncles' mummies in decorated crypts attested to pious services. Flavonax had followed their long line into Amen's Temple, which his ancestors had defended six centuries earlier against Assyrian invaders. Thanks to these forefathers' negotiating skills, the Temple had survived. An even earlier uncle had defied the black Cushites from the upper reaches of the Nile. Hieroglyphic chronicles revealed that, for fifty long years, Egypt had chafed under black Pharaohs.

The family had always believed in Egypt's resilience, had resisted foreigners, and Thebes had remained the navel of civilisation. Timeworn stone tablets told of progenitor Hebrehotamen, instrumental in Thebes' long ago victory that broke the barbaric Hyksos herders' dominance. Amen, Patron of Pharaohs, had looked after the family that served him. It would remain thus and Amen's power would penetrate beyond Egypt. His name meant Hidden One; blue denoted his omnipresent invisibility. His patronage would make Egypt prosper, as long as his name was on everybody's lips.

Flavonax' cogitation was interrupted.

"Three red war craft!"

Serapis warships? This far south? Serapis' last Temple was at Elephantine. Past Philae was the Invisible God's and Sparrowhawk country. Serapis' Cult had been invented by the Ptolemaic pseudo-Pharaohs, vainly trying to gain spiritual domination and control. It was well infiltrated by Amen's disciples, but naval actions this far south had not been reported. The presence of red warships was worrisome. The waning sunlight was bright enough to make out white bulls on their red banners. Cautiously, Captain Ahertem advised Ankhhotepsenusrenetjertamen to be ready to leave the sacerdotal barque if it became imperative to do so.

"Ptolemaic ships wouldn't dare strike Amen's barque, priests are no threat to them."

"They are to us!" Captain Ahertem, observing the red ships' formation, was adamant.

"Why attack us?" But Flavonax knew. The Ptolemies had challenged Amen for centuries. Their and their Bull-Cult's motivations and actions were unpredictable. The Ptolemies weren't tolerant in the Egyptian way, and after centuries, were still un-Egyptian.

"Leave for shore now," Captain Ahertem urged. "The reed boat is ready. Hide in the rushes. I'll defend the barque without worrying about your safety."

Hidden from the red ships' view, sacred objects and priests were lowered into the small boat. The two rowers, straining oars, were afraid of crocodiles. On the Nile, the reptilian scourges were never far.

"In Serapis' name, surrender your barque. The Pharaoh commands!" was shouted across the water.

Defiant laughter answered the challenge. A shower of glowing arrows rose from the red ships and descended slowly onto the blue barque. The synchronised rising and falling of these fiery arrows was beautiful, but their unholy intent was not. Flames rose. Through rushes, the priests saw frantic dousing of fires. Another salvo of burning arrows came in low arcs; flames licked up, setting the blue-striped sails ablaze.

"Board!" was yelled from the red ships.

Crocodiles heard the command. Huge bodies charged through thickets into the river. It didn't take long.

The rising moon shed pale light over the Nile, empty but for a drifting, smouldering hull. Crocodiles, efficient disposers, left no survivors. Mosquitoes swarmed upon the priests. The boat was eased into the river and drifted north until landing steps to a minor temple could be made out. The Nile glistened peacefully.

I

Felix qui potuit reram cognoscere causas, happy is he who reads the causes, so wrote Virgil alluding to Lucretius' poem *On the Nature of Things*, composed to convert people to believe in Epicurean delights.

Gaius Licinius Macer Calvus, Gaius Helvius Cinna and Gaius Valerius Catullus, all Transpadane Gauls, friends and poets, were to meet to explore life, collect suffersome experiences, compromising situations, philosophical predicaments, ridiculous happenstances, digestible and indigestible fixes. When friends inconveniently have common pronomes, *inter se*, chances are that two Gaiusses respond or react, or the wrong Gaius answers. Calvus, Cinna and Catullus was simpler. Epicurus' ideals, life's purpose being pleasure, were to their liking. And scandals, gay abandon, wine.

On this pleasant summer afternoon, as Lesbia was salving her statuette of Pudentitia, the little Goddess of Chastity, her new *ornatrix*, beautician slave, handed her a novelty convex mirror. Lesbia, looking forward to a literary evening at Atticus', had finished bathing and wore only a very loose *tunicula*, short tunic of flimsy material, which hid but didn't hide the curves fashion demanded and she possessed in pleasing proportions. Examining herself in the gleaming polished brass satisfied her; she was not endowed with false modesty. Senator Cato would be there; he ought to be attracted to her, if he was a man; every other man was, and Lesbia found his rough, almost gnarled exterior extremely masculine. But Senator Cato was so full of rectitude ...

The *ornatrix*, a gift from her brother Publius, examined Lesbia too. Where had she come from? It wasn't important; she was only a slave, not even Roman.

"A woman requires three hard, three soft, three short, three long, three red, three white and three black attributes to be beautiful," the *ornatrix* advised her *domina*; perhaps she was trying to impress. It was her duty that all of these attributes were properly looked after, to ensure that Lesbia remained the most beautiful and beguiling woman in Rome, who had no intention of ever becoming passé. Up-to-datedness was important, and if an *ornatrix* fell behind with times and trends, she'd be traded in without second thoughts and another, with better fashion-sense, would immediately be obtained; *ornatrice's* opinions didn't matter, as long as their services achieved the desired result. Lesbia felt content and let the slave prattle on. "Two breasts and the posterior must be hard; two hands and

tummy soft; nose and two feet short; fingers and two thighs long; two cheeks and mouth red; two legs and neck white; kohl-shaded eyes and ...”

“That’s not true!” Lesbia, who had bright-blue eyes, interrupted her personal slave. “I have it plucked!” Fashion had its demands and the polished mirror surface reflected nicely what the gauzelike material of her tunicula discretely attempted to veil but inadequately concealed. “Hurry, I have to get ready!”

Barely half the afternoon remained; time to get made-up and dressed might become tight. The slave jumped to her task. That her domina be the most beautiful woman would please any ornatrix.

The sun peeked through half-closed shutters of the apartment in Via Nova. Catullus was arguing with Cinna, Calvus hadn’t yet arrived. Intruding street noise was near deafening. Throngs of mongers offered wares in loud hawking-voices, augmenting their clamouring with multifarious clanging and banging instruments. Shouting was intermingled by noisy squabbling as people tried to progress through molasses-like crowds towards incompatible destinations and interspersed by boars’ grunts and sows with squealing piglets, highly effective street cleaners; nothing putrescible went to waste.

Heavy carts rumbled over cobblestones with debris from burnt-out buildings. To ease the interminable queues of intersecting vehicular traffic, carting was prohibited during daylight, except for funeral processions and heavy rubble or construction material wagons pulled by slow-moving, long-horned oxen. The wagons barely fitted into the streets and negotiated corners with difficulty, frequently getting wedged-in by unexpected protrusions.

Futilely, the wooden shutters of Catullus’ apartment were closed against the street noise; Catullus decided he preferred noise to candlelight and opened them. Hesitantly, the room assumed colour: the walls were soot-black from cooking fires; a woad-blue woollen blanket on the bedstead reminded Cinna of their native Transpadane Gaul; the grey books, neatly tied with a hempen string, had been acquired from a *libellione*, a second-hand book pedlar; a hazel staff leant against the wall; polished oxhide of resoled sandals boasted newness; the pomegranates on a tin plate looked juicy.

“Where is Calvus?” asked Catullus irritably. “He promised to be here at the ninth hour.”

Cinna excused his friend. “It’s the traffic; and it’s his first time coming here.”

Catullus wanted to go to Old Cato’s, because, *dum differtur, vita transcurrit*, whilst procrastinating, life passes by. Knocking rendered

answering unnecessary: the threesome was complete. "*Potius sero quam nunquam*, better late than never. Hail Calvus."

"*Salve*. This place is hard to find."

"I gave you precise directions," Catullus challenged.

"They fooled me. At the Velabrum, near Vicus Gallinae Albae, a butcher chased a loose sow; vendors juggling wares and beggars fell over each other and the squealing sow. I couldn't get through, detoured through the Porta Viminalis, and, at Ennius' Portal, short-cut into a cul-de-sac. The Temple of Suada, the Goddess of Persuasion with the Beautiful Lips, was at its end, lustrations were in progress and no way around it."

Catullus didn't know Suada's Temple. "Does she have beautiful lips?"

Calvus hadn't seen her. "The Goddess didn't give me divine directory assistance either. At Vicus Pullius I asked for Fortuna with the Triangular Basket: at least she was known to everyone. Rome ought to have an address-finding system. Why can't we have street directories? Minotaurs would get lost! Why can't cities be like legionary camps? They are easy to know; every legionary finds his tent and bed."

"Rome isn't a camp, and Romans can't be ordered around like legionaries." Rome's sprawl was getting worse; soon nothing would be findable.

Cinna agreed, his own apartment on the Quirinal wasn't far; street jostle made long-distance friendships impracticable, and, while gossip spreads fast, living nearby was better. Catullus' apartment was near the Forum; it only needed passing through the Porta Fontinalis below the Arx and up the gently rising Clivus Argentarius to get there after turning right behind the Curia, again right into the Argiletum and Via Nova couldn't be missed, but detours were tricky and led into mazes of narrow alleys and dead ends. Via Nova ended where the Bronxi Bros. specialised in antifatulents and antieructatives. Next to them, Pissius sold diuretic formulations, good for passing sand, and laxatives.

Catullus' directions to Calvus had indeed been concise: "You'll recognise Pissius' by his advertising: three legs in quickstep formation; after right-turning into the Argiletum, left into the third lane, where once an old pear tree stood; don't count the opposite lanes, or you'll pass it. Where Croidus stirs pitch-cauldrons to bind his brooms, you're thirty paces past: turn back. Where the old pear tree had been will now be on your right. Easy. Ask for Ennius' Portal, pass through, exit west at the apple marinader's vats; Vicus Pullius begins there. Swarms of small flies hover around the vats next to Fortuna with the Triangular Basket: there is Via Nova." Calvus should've listened.

"Let's go," Catullus urged. "Rome isn't like the quiet Transpadane; here we need earplugs, but money happens in Rome and I've got cobwebs in my purse."

“Wait! I ordered sausages,” Calvus demanded. “Getting here made me peckish.” Knocking signalled their arrival. Roman sausages are justly famous.

“Delicious! Where’d you get them?”

“From *Salarius* Cratinus. His pots boil under Capita Babula’s relief, next to the flagellators’ whips.”

“Take a pomegranate,” Catullus offered. “No pips on the floor, please. I won’t see ‘em in the dark.”

Calvus wiped his fatty fingers. “Did you hear about the Vestal Virgins? Jupiter’s holy fire they’re guarding went out.”

“Caesar is Jupiter’s *Pontifex Maximus*. It’s his duty to punish them.”

“I dislike Caesar.” Everyone knew that Catullus disliked Caesar.

Calvus was practical. “Caesar won’t do anything.”

Catullus got up and bolted the shutters; the apartment was plunged into near-darkness. His sandals’ newness reflected dim candlelight. “Where’re my laces? Bithynian sandals,” he explained, “soft and pliant like their women.”

“I bought pomade at Unxia’s Temple. Egyptian secret recipe, effective against baldness and smells like Syrian roses.” Calvus offered. “It’s fashionable to be of good scent ways. Want some?”

“Want what?”

“Unxia’s unguent!”

“Thanks. I’ll make obeisances to Unxia.”

“Amen.”

Cinna, Calvus and Catullus were friends since boyhood; now they studied logic, cogitation and mnemonics at the school of Parthenius of Nicaea.

“Cogitation with an empty mind is effective for understanding what you sense,” Parthenius had taught, sitting cross-legged on a colourful cushion. “Imperfect recall or memory loss is common, but mnemonics help prevent forgetfulness.”

Parthenius’ teaching felt comfortable; he wove knowledge together: “After the Titans’ defeat by the Olympians, the Golden Time of peace vanished. Zeus needed Divinities to celebrate his victory. He slept with Mnemosyne, Goddess of Memory, nine consecutive nights and begot the nine Muses. Mnemosyne’s opposite is Lethe, Goddess of Oblivion. Their mind struggles are evident: forgetting consigns knowledge to Lethe. Either Goddess has a river in the Underworld: the newly-dead, drinking of Lethe’s river, lose their memory. Initiated souls, finding Mnemosyne’s river, drink from it, and end transmigration. Applying Mnemosyne’s methods is the study of mnemonics.”

“Isn’t it easier to take notes?” Cinna had asked.

“*Pons asini*, donkey’s bridges,” Parthenius had replied. “Cripples walk with crutches.”

“Then why write at all?”

“*Dies diem docet*, one day teaches the other. Writing deprives Lethe of consigning thoughts to oblivion and memories remain alive for the benefit of others.”

Calvus, Cinna and Catullus deferred to Parthenius’ simple wisdom: *barba non facit philosophum*, a beard doesn’t make a philosopher and *ars longa, vita brevis*, art lives long, but life is short. Talking about Nicaea or Mithradates always made Parthenius wistful. A poem by Parthenius to his wife Arete was known, but nobody had ever met her; the *Magister* conceded that some memories were best left to Lethe’s waters. “Should you ever come to Trophonius’ Oracle near Lebadeia, get me an ampoule of it.”

Cinna and Catullus had accompanied Praetor Memmius and Lucretius to Bithynia, hoping to make fortunes, as travelling to new Roman provinces held promises. Memmius, on returning to Rome, built himself a splendid villa on the Aventine and lived in grandeur. Their own trips to Paphlagonia, Mysia, Lydia and Phrygia hadn’t brought them similar riches, but the culture and beauty of these ancient lands had made them aware of the astonishing variety of people in a world dominated by Rome’s arms. Unfortunately, Rome’s might stifled individuality and differing ways of life, denying that anything but the Roman Way could be worthwhile. As occupiers, Romans enforced uniformity, political correctness in speaking, doing and thinking, insisted on drab conformity and imposed Rome’s way of peace where peace had reigned before she had intruded. For her self-perceived superior culture’s sake and an obviously enlightened duty to preserve otherwise unappreciated beauty, Romans transported ancient sacred art and treasures to Rome. The victims, powerless to demand restitution and bemoaning their losses, didn’t appreciate their liberators, but graffiti urging ‘Romans go home’ irked Roman officialdom. Why weren’t they welcome, why did these provincials yearn for independent misery? Ionian people resented the sole remaining superpower’s crippling yoke, but, helpless, all they could do was to loath Rome’s peacekeepers. Conquered, impoverished, second-class, they were denied Roman citizens’ rights and privileges. Cinna had felt kinship with them; his and his friends’ homeland Transpadane Gaul had been similarly deprived.

Grey-eyed Cinna was slight, had light-brown, straight hair, cut to shoulder length and a faint lisp. Born into a once-respected family of bards, he had learned his little remaining Transpadane inheritance from his grandfather. Cinna remembered his icy-grey beard, icy-grey eyes and hawk-nose in a gnarled face, recalled the feel of his rough and loving hands. When sitting

on his knees, grandfather had sung of Transpadane heroes, lynxes, bears, wolves and bison. Animals remained, but the heroes were now hazy shadows; their stories and songs had become sighs in the wind. Now, even the bards' language was a wraithlike memory. Hairstyles had been simple: full, topknotted, the rest cascading to its natural length. "We were our own masters," Cinna thought forlornly.

With Romans had come spades, forks, flails and sickles; Transpadane Celts had never known such. "Yes, the same is happening to the Gallograecians," Cinna had mused and felt with his Eastern kinsmen. Ogmios, Celtic God of Eloquence, like a leaf in autumn, was blown away.

"Ogmios chained heroes by their ears. His tongue gave us songs," his grandfather had said and sung about Belenus, the Bright God, on whose sacred day he had given young Cinna an amulet with his emblem, the bull and fire. "We've become domesticated like cultivated lentils," he had said. Now a smooth disk, the amulet's outlines were barely discernible: bull and fire had to be imagined.

Cinna's father was progressive and didn't waste time with immaterial past thoughts. Cinna received a Latin education, but inherited bardic talents couldn't be denied: he became a poet.

For Parthenius' sake, Cinna had visited Trophonius' Oracle, contributed generously, and had been permitted to sleep in a prescribed hole for revelations. Neither sleep nor revealing dreams had come. Shepherds, sheep and goats had indiscriminately drunk from Lethe's and Mnemosyne's aboveground springs without effects and Cinna had returned without Lethal water.

Calvus hadn't gone to Bithynia with Cinna and Catullus, as his parents had insisted that he complete his oratory studies. His father was Verona's annalist, an influential appointment. Most of the family were tall, with large feet, but Calvus was delicate, compensating for his lack of size by impatience, never sat still and had been great at getting into mischief, could talk the whitewash off walls, was naturally of the *genus irritabile vatum*, the touchy genus of poets, and became a lawyer. Enthusiasm, quick wit, histrionics and ants-in-his-pants never left him.

Calvus wore a jade medallion. Because he had been born on the first of the Kalendae of the eleventh month, January, it depicted double-faced Janus, God of Beginning and End. After Calvus' oratory training at forensic schools and elocutory training, he became good at mixing fire and ice and specialised in plain Latin.

Like the Calvians, the Catulli were well established. Caesar stayed with them whenever in Verona. Catullus, Cinna and Calvus had enjoyed swimming, fishing, wandering in forested hills, climbing mountains; an old

shepherd's shack a favourite destination, where Bintinus, in a tattered *birrus* pelt and his dogs, had herded sheep and shared self-made cheese. His *birrus* had had no shape, but his cheese and flat bread tasted like food for Mountain Gods.

Catullus had received literary schooling, and as Rome's literary circles thrived on intrigues, Catullus' acerbic epigrams had become famous and feared; he alone ridiculed Caesar with impunity. Tall and self-assured, Catullus' voice was well modulated, and people enjoyed listening to him. Curly red locks crowned his high forehead. He wore a gemstone ring engraved with Mercury's winged sandals, given to him as a birthday present on Maia, Mercury's mother's day in the Ides of May, when merchant guilds perform lustral rites at Mercury's sacred springs. The ring should have ensured wealth, alas, Catullus often grumbled about cobwebs and a lack of gold in his purse.

In the adjoining cubicle Catullus' three slaves chatted with Cinna's four. Cinna's grandfather had said heroes couldn't be owned, but Cinna couldn't envision a world without slaves, who, in spite of inherent disadvantages, they could be obstreperous, a waste of discipline and expensive to maintain when sick and old, slaves were needed. "My slaves will lead," Calvus offered and the three left for Old Cato's.

To maximise letting space, stairs and walkways were steep and narrow, but at least this building was kept free of beggars. If it weren't for the stink, they wouldn't have noticed the fuller's barrel at the bottom of the stairwell. Fullers' requirements made disposal of urine convenient, since throwing it out of windows was frowned upon. Collection crews regularly exchanged full barrels; fullers needed raw material for their processes. Sadly, the barrel's lid didn't keep emanations within.

The building's façade had recently been refurbished; blue and sea-green ox-eyed scrolls were set against sienna-painted walls. Calvus' eight slaves, conveniently parked nearby, collected themselves, and formed into van and rearguards to permit walking without being bumped into. Old Cato's school was at Apollo Palatinus', behind the Forum. Towards the back of it, in a large building in the Bow and Lyre Lane, all kind of artists met; only noisy musicians weren't welcome and Persiphonous, an olive-skinned Greek, supplied refreshments. Apollo's *Flamen*, vested in gold-bordered raiment and *apex*, sporadically passing by, didn't approve of drinking and frowned upon boisterousness, but Persiphonous, with a flexible attitude toward art, artists and business, had never been accused of sacrilege, because his prices were reasonable and his beverages acceptable.

Upon entering the artists' room, argumentative babbles of artists enveloped them. Most artists are philosophers and want to be left alone, but require company for it.

"Who judges art best?" could be heard. "I despise critics. They know nothing."

"... demand of a man to daub or scribble before judging!"

"Do lots of mares make a stud? The quality of the stallion attracts buyers!"

"Forest dwellers can't judge seascapes!"

"Ageing, thin-blooded Persian potentates judge qualities of women better than the Lost God's celibate priests!"

"Or Arval Brothers!"

"Definitely. Good taste doesn't self-generate. Fricus had a fertility rug woven from virgins' pubic hair."

"*De gustibus non est disputandum*, one can't argue about taste."

"He should've used fecund sows' bristles."

A pale man with large wild eyes and long black hair dropped his beaker and groped for it under the trestle table.

"Thinks he paints better'n Demophilus or Zeuxis," a freckled youth with reddish hair, furry like a fox, interrupted, referring to the man who couldn't paint at all.

Poets and philosophers happily malign each other, often in macaronic verse, but it was good to listen to painters and carvers; they had odd ideas for satires. It wasn't easy to get through the arguing thron'g grinding battle-axes for critics.

"One has to know great men before understanding their art."

Calvus agreed. "Geniuses should be studied."

At the literary tables wrangles with clever words were in progress.

"Puns are the lowest form of wit," replied a recipient.

"*Si tacusses, philosophus mansisses*, if you'd kept silent, you'd've remained a philosopher."

"Papyrus should be cheaper! I wrote a serious maxim on the wall of the Circus Maximus; Lictors made me remove it, and, because I couldn't pay the spot fine, they beat me!"

Graffiti artists were deprecated. "Cheap paper'd be good to record good ideas."

"I'm on a dissertation of lice and bedbugs." The speaker scratched under his armpit. A steam bath would've done him good. "Hard when paper's expensive." He stopped to look for his itch's cause. "Paper's high price is censorship; writing would be no problem if paper were cheap."

"Cheap paper is freedom!" There was applause. "Why doesn't the government do something about it? It taxes paper, it taxes everything."

"If they'll tax sex, I'll pull out!"

“Paper should be free, the corn dole is. Why is free expression expensive?”

“Damn government.”

Persiphonous’ wine was plentiful. No one agreed with anyone as every philosopher thinks he knows everything better; teachers are incomprehensible to students and critics to artists. Specialists know more and more about less and less until they know everything about nothing, but teachers know less and less about more and more, until, like critics, they know nothing about everything.

“Hail, Nepos,” exclaimed Catullus.

“What’s new?” was the cheerful retort. “I was at a banquet with Atticus and Cicero at Hortensius’.”

“Lucky you,” Catullus replied. “He likes recitals.”

“There weren’t any; we talked about Caesar’s calendar proposal, birthdays and their significance for oracles.” Nepos smiled. “It’s hard to divine where events lead to and change dissolves known certainty. Cicero deplores the deterioration. To make sense of public affairs, he needs diviners.”

“Life’s changeable.” Catullus thought of a twist for a new epigram and made an elaborate knot on a red thread to remind himself.

“But this new calendar! Everyone is consulting prophets to forecast what’ll happen.”

“What do calendars have to do with oracles? Why start years with January?”

“I like it; I was born on the first of Janus’ month,” protested Calvus.

“Your birthday warrants a calendar change?” Cinna queried.

Nepos hadn’t thought about it like that. “Don’t worry, nobody takes Caesar’s unnatural calendar proposal seriously. Years start with spring and end with winter: no Caesar can change nature.”

“Then why does he insist? Country folk won’t have it! They’ll think city folk are nuts, and the Pontiffs won’t like it either. Purification from the old year is on Februs’ day. Caesar meddles with the Gods!”

“It happened before. Numa added January to the year’s beginning and February at its end when years had only ten months.”

That didn’t make sense to Calvus. “February doesn’t follow December.”

“February was shifted. Tarquinius Priscus tried to start years with January,” Cinna explained. “He couldn’t, though January had been in another season.”

“The calendar’s always been a mess, but I’d like my year to start with my birthday,” Calvus declared.

“Seasons and lunar years never agree, so the Pontiffs declare an intercalary month when the alignment gets too askew or when they feel like it and an extra month feels like a bonus.”

“True, an occasional month of Mercedonius adds variety and flexibility to pliable years. With a precision calendar, it won’t be the same!”

“Will it keep years and seasons in balance?”

“Who cares? Only one day follows another.”

“Let the Gods be thanked for that! But the proposal will give Quirinus’ Pontifex and his Flamen heartburn. Quirinus’ is the last day of the year, he is the Conclusive and Ultimate; they let no Quirite forget.”

“It’s nothing! The change won’t pass; it’s against natural order.” Cinna didn’t like Caesar either. “Caesar claims descent from Aphrodite, why doesn’t he start his years with April? Because she is a fickle Goddess?”

“All women are fickle. Look at Lesbia.”

Calvus’ comment annoyed Catullus. “Lesbia has nothing to do with this,” he flared.

Nepos had another rumour. “I heard that the month of Quinctilis could be changed to Julius’ month.”

“Julius Caesar’s? Impossible! Next he might decide seven days are awkward and change weeks into a dozen days.”

“There is a proposal to make weeks eight days long; bureaucrats claim it’ll be easier for administration,” Nepos added. “It isn’t Caesar-driven. It’s from Annonia’s Department of the Corn Dole, whose officials want to be known as public servants. Can’t believe it, they always dictate, none serves any public.”

“You’re right. Even the officials’ stables are for public horses only, leaving no good hitching-spots.”

“They maintain that Nones, Ides and Kalends are inadequate and months have different lengths, that makes dole entitlement calculations awkward.”

“Don’t tell Caesar, he might call the eighth day Julesday!”

“At their next meeting, Pompey will claim the month of Sextilis and call it Pompilis. I’ll make an epigram about this!” Catullus tied another knot into a red memory string.

“Pompey won’t be happy with Sextilis, it has only thirty days, one shorter than Caesar’s!”

“That’s a problem!”

“Crassus will take September, its got thirty-one days. If Caesar and Pompey have their months, why not he? He is richer; he’ll buy himself an extra day to have the longest Crass-month.”

Catullus had a few epigrams for Caesar coming.

“Be careful,” Calvus counselled. “Remember Gnaeus Naevius’ eulogy of Marcus Claudius Marcellus, the Sword of Rome? Naevius criticised and

offended, and was punished; first prison, then exile. The law imposes fines for defamation. Take care.”

“In Gnaeus Naevius’ case, the judges were biased!”

“They always are.”

“They aren’t supposed to be.”

“The effect’s the same.”

“What about the truth?”

“It riled them. They’d have laughed at lies.”

“I don’t defame! I write no more than is said in the Senate.”

“Senators have immunity, you don’t.”

“Steady,” admonished Nepos. “We discussed taxes afterwards. The Gods know they’re too high; the government punishes success and subsidises failure.

“Governments never have enough money.”

“Public servants spend more than is allocated to them; a *semuncia* less and they’d think they didn’t do their job”

“A waste of honest tax payers’ money!”

“Where are honest tax payers?”

“There might be, but tax collectors would tax colours off roof tiles if they could.”

“There are new rules about permissible lengths of ...” Catullus was about to complain, but Calvus chimed in: “Red memory strings?”

Nepos picked up the thread. “Always new rules. Measurable rules make it easy.”

“Aren’t rules better than no rules?”

“No! Rules are codified official greed.”

“But the dole department?”

“*Nescit, quot digitos habeat en manu*, they don’t know how many fingers a hand has, and if one swallowed a gnat, he’d have more brains in his belly than in his head.”

“*Quod non est in acta, non est in mundo*, what’s not in the files is unknown to the world.”