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 Excerpt
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DE RERUM NATURA

BOOK I

Thou Mother of the Aenead race, delight
 Of men and gods, bountiful Venus, thou
 Who under the sky's gliding constellations
 Fillest ship-carrying ocean with thy presence
 And the corn-bearing lands, since through thy power
 Each kind of living creature is conceived
 Then riseth and beholdeth the sun's light:
 Before thee, Goddess, do the winds and clouds
 Of heaven take flight, before thee and thy coming:
 For thee the daedal earth puts forth sweet flowers:
 Beholding thee the smooth deep laughs, the sky
 Grows calm and shines with wide-outspreading light.
 For soon as the day's vernal countenance 10
 Has been revealed, and fresh from wintry bonds
 Blows the birth-giving breeze of the West wind,
 First do the birds of air give sign of thee,
 Goddess, and thine approach, as through their hearts
 Pierces thine influence. Next the herds, grown wild,
 Bound over the glad pastures and swim through
 The rapid streams, as captured by thy charm
 Each one with eager longing follows thee
 Whithersoever thou wouldst lure them on.
 And thus through seas, mountains and rushing rivers,
 Through the birds' leafy homes and the green plains,
 Striking bland love into the hearts of all,
 Thou art the cause that following his lust
 Each should renew his race after his kind. 20
 Therefore since thou alone art Nature's mistress,
 And since without thine aid naught can rise forth
 Into the glorious regions of the light,
 Nor aught grow to be gladsome and delectable,

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[More information](#)

2

LUCRETIUS

Thee would I win to help me while I write
 These verses, which I labour to compose
 About the Nature of Things for my friend's sake,
 This scion of the Memmii,¹ whom thou, Goddess,
 Hast willed to be found peerless all his days
 In every grace. Therefore the more, divine one,
 Grant to my words eternal loveliness:
 Cause meanwhile that the savage works of warfare
 Over all seas and lands sink hushed to rest. 30
 For thou alone hast power to bless mankind
 With tranquil peace; since of war's savage works
 Mavors mighty in battle hath control,
 Who oft flings himself back upon thy lap
 Quite vanquished by love's never-healing wound;
 And so with upturned face and shapely neck
 Thrown backward, feeds with love his hungry looks,
 Gazing on thee, Goddess, with open mouth,
 Supine, and on thy lips his spirit hangs.
 O'er him as thus he lies bend down to enfold him
 With thy divine embrace, and from thy lips
 Pour tender speech, petitioning calm peace,
 O glorious divinity, for thy Romans. 40
 For nor can I in our country's hour of trouble
 Toil with a mind untroubled at my task,
 Nor yet may the famed child of Memmius
 Be spared from public service in such times.

For the rest, leisured ears and a keen mind 50
 Withdrawn from cares lend to true reasoning,
 Lest my gifts, that with loving diligence
 I set out for you, ere they be understood
 You should leave disregarded and despised.
 For of the most high theory of the heavens
 And of the deities I shall undertake

¹ Gaius Memmius, a politician of noble family, to whom Lucretius dedicated his poem.

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 Excerpt
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DE RERUM NATURA I 3

To tell you in my discourse, and will reveal
 What are the primal elements of things,¹
 Out of which nature gives birth and increase
 And nourishment to all things; into which
 Nature likewise, when they have been destroyed,
 Resolves them back in turn. These I am wont
 In setting forth my argument, to call
 Matter, or bodies that engender things,
 Or to name them the seeds of things: again
 As first-bodies I sometimes speak of them, 60
 Because from them first everything is formed.

When prostrate upon earth lay human life,
 Visibly trampled down and foully crushed
 Beneath Religion's cruelty, who meanwhile
 Out of the regions of the heavens above
 Showed forth her face, lowering on mortal men
 With horrible aspect, first did a man of Greece²
 Dare to lift up his mortal eyes against her;
 The first was he to stand up and defy her.
 Him neither stories of the gods, nor lightnings,
 Nor heaven with muttering menaces could quell,
 But all the more did they arouse his soul's 70
 Keen valour, till he longed to be the first
 To break through the fast-bolted doors of Nature.
 Therefore his fervent energy of mind
 Prevailed, and he passed onward, voyaging far
 Beyond the flaming ramparts of the world,³
 Ranging in mind and spirit far and wide
 Throughout the unmeasured universe; and thence
 A conqueror he returns to us, bringing back
 Knowledge both of what can and what cannot
 Rise into being, teaching us in fine

¹ The atoms.

² Epicurus (342–270 B.C.).

³ The circling streams of fiery aether, which form the outmost layer of the sphere of our world. See v. 457–470.

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 Excerpt
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4 LUCRETIUS

Upon what principle each thing has its powers
 Limited, and its deep-set boundary stone.
 Therefore now has Religion been cast down
 Beneath men's feet, and trampled on in turn:
 Ourselves heaven-high his victory exalts.

Herein this fear assails me, lest perchance 80
 You should suppose I would initiate you
 Into a school of reasoning unholy,
 And set your feet upon a path of sin:
 Whereas in truth too often has this Religion
 Given birth to sinful and unholy deeds.
 So once at Aulis did those chosen chiefs,
 Those foremost heroes of the Danaan host,
 Foully defile the Trivian Virgin's altar
 With Iphianassa's lifeblood.¹ For so soon
 As the fillet wreathed around her maiden locks
 Had streamed in equal lengths down either cheek,
 And soon as she was aware of her sire standing
 Sorrowful by the altar, and at his side
 The priestly ministers hiding the knife, 90
 And the folk shedding tears at sight of her,
 Speechless in terror, dropping on her knees
 To the earth she sank down. Nor in that hour
 Of anguish might it avail her that she first
 Had given the name of father to the king;
 For by the hands of men lifted on high
 Trembling to the altar she was borne,
 Not that, when the due ceremonial rites
 Had been accomplished, she might be escorted
 By the clear-sounding hymenæal song,
 But that a stainless maiden foully stained,
 In the very season of marriage she might fall
 A sorrowful victim by a father's stroke,
 That so there might be granted to the fleet

¹ Iphigeneia, whom her father Agamemnon sacrificed to Artemis.

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DE RERUM NATURA I 5

A happy and hallowed sailing. To such crimes 100
Religion has had power to persuade men.

There yet may come a time when you yourself,
Surrendering to the terror-breathing tales
Of seers and bards, will seek to abandon us.
Aye verily, how many dreams even now
May they be forging for you, which might well
Overturn your philosophy of life,
And trouble all your happiness with fear!
And with good cause. For if men could perceive
That there was a fixed limit to their sorrows,
By some means they would find strength to withstand
The hallowed lies and threatenings of these seers:
But as it is, men have no means, no power 110
To make a stand, since everlasting seem
The penalties that they must fear in death.
For none knows what is the nature of the soul,
Whether 'tis born, or on the contrary
Enters into our bodies at their birth:
Whether, when torn from us by death, it perishes
Together with us, or thereafter goes
To visit Orcus' glooms and desolate chasms;
Or penetrates by ordinance divine
Into brutes in man's stead, as sang our own
Ennius,¹ who first from pleasant Helicon
Brought down a garland of unfading leaf,
Destined among Italian tribes of men
To win bright glory. And yet in spite of this 120
Ennius sets forth in immortal verse
How none the less there does exist a realm
Of Acheron, though neither do our souls
Nor bodies penetrate thither, but a kind
Of phantom images, pale in wondrous wise:

¹ Quintus Ennius (239–170 B.C.), the first of the great Roman poets. He believed in the Pythagorean theory of transmigration of souls, and was the first to use the Greek hexameter as a Latin metre.

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6 LUCRETIUS

And thence it was, so he relates, that once
 The ghost of ever-living Homer rose
 Before him, shedding salt tears, and began
 To unfold in discourse the nature of things.
 Therefore not only must we grasp the truth
 Concerning things on high, what principle
 Controls the courses of the sun and moon,
 And by what force all that takes place on earth
 Is governed, but above all by keen thought 130
 We must investigate whereof consists
 The soul and the mind's nature, and what it is
 That comes before us when we wake, if then
 We are preyed on by disease, or when we lie
 Buried in sleep, and terrifies our minds,
 So that we seem face to face to behold
 And hear those speaking to us who are dead,
 Whose bones the earth now holds in its embrace.

Nor am I unaware how hard my task
 In Latin verses to set clearly forth
 The obscure truths discovered by the Greeks,
 Chiefly because so much will need new terms
 To deal with it, owing to the penury
 Of our tongue and the novelty of the themes.
 Nevertheless your worth and the delight 140
 Of your sweet friendship, which I hope to win,
 Prompt me to bear the burden of any toil,
 And lead me on to watch the serene nights through,
 Seeking by what words and what poetry
 I may at length avail to shed so clear
 A light upon your spirit, that thereby
 Your gaze may search the depths of hidden things.

This terror therefore and darkness of the mind
 Must needs be scattered not by the sun's beams
 And day's bright arrows, but by contemplation
 Of Nature's aspect and her inward law.

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DE RERUM NATURA I 7

And this first principle of her design
 Shall be our starting point: nothing is ever
 Begotten by divine will out of nothing. 150
 In truth the reason fear so dominates
 All mortals, is that they behold on earth
 And in the sky many things happening,
 Yet of these operations by no means
 Can they perceive the causes, and so fancy
 That they must come to pass by power divine.
 Therefore when we have understood that nothing
 Can be born out of nothing, we shall then
 Win juster knowledge of the truth we seek,
 Both from what elements each thing can be formed,
 And in what way all things can come to pass
 Without the intervention of the Gods.

For if things came from nothing, every kind
 Might be born out of every thing; naught then 160
 Would require seed. Thus men might rise from
 ocean,
 The scaly race out of the land, while birds
 Might suddenly be hatched forth from the sky:
 Cattle and other herds and every kind
 Of wild beast, bred by no fixed law of birth,
 Would inhabit tilth and wilderness alike.
 No fruit would remain constant to its tree,
 But would change; every tree might bear all kinds.
 For if there were not for each kind its own
 Begetting bodies, how could there be for things
 A fixed unvarying mother? But in fact
 Since all are formed from fixed seeds, each is born
 And issues into the borders of the light 170
 From that alone wherein resides its substance
 And its first-bodies. And for this cause all things
 Cannot be generated out of all,
 Since in each dwells its own particular power.
 Again why do we see in spring the rose,

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[More information](#)

Corn in the summer's heat, vines bursting forth
 When autumn summons them, if not because
 When the fixed seeds of things at the right time
 Have flowed together, there is then revealed
 Whatever is thus made, while the due seasons
 Are present, and the quickened earth brings forth
 Safely into the borders of the light
 Her tender nurslings? But if they were formed 180
 From nothing, they would suddenly spring up
 At unfixed periods and unsuitable times,
 Since there would then be no first elements
 That could be kept from a begetting union
 By the unpropitious season. Then again,
 For things to increase they would have no need
 Of lapse of time that seeds might flock together,
 If they could grow from nothing. Suddenly
 Small babes would become youths; trees would arise
 Shooting up in a moment from the ground.
 But nothing of the kind, 'tis plain, takes place,
 Seeing that all things grow little by little,
 As befits, from determined seed, and growing
 Preserve their kind: so that you may perceive 190
 That all things become greater and are nourished
 Out of their own substance. Furthermore
 Without fixed annual seasons for the rain
 Earth could not put her gladdening produce forth,
 Nor yet, if kept apart from nourishment,
 Could living creatures propagate their kind
 Or sustain life: so that with greater reason
 You may think many things have many atoms
 In common, as we see that different words
 Have common letters, than that anything
 Can come to being without first elements.
 Again, why could not Nature have produced
 Men of such mighty bulk, that they could wade 200
 Through the deep places of the sea, or rend
 Huge mountains with their hands, or in one life

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DE RERUM NATURA I 9

Overpass many living generations,
 If it be not because there has been assigned
 A fixed substance for begetting things,
 And what can thence arise is thus ordained?
 Lastly, since it is evident that tilled grounds
 Excel the untilled, and yield to labouring hands
 A richer harvest, we may thence infer
 That in the earth there must be primal atoms, 210
 Which, when we turn her teeming clods with coulthers,
 Labouring the soil, we stimulate to rise.
 But if none such existed, you would then
 See all things without any toil of ours
 Spring up far richer of their own accord.
 Therefore we must confess this truth, that nothing 205
 Can come from nothing, since seed is required
 For each thing, out of which it may be born
 And lift itself into the air's soft breezes. 207

Furthermore Nature dissolves each form back
 Into its own first-bodies, nor does she ever
 Annihilate things. For if aught could be mortal
 In all its parts, then each thing would be snatched
 From our eyes to destruction in a moment:
 For there would be no need of any force
 To cause disruption of its parts, and loosen 220
 Their fastenings. But in fact each is composed
 Of everlasting seeds; so till some force
 Arrive that with a blow can shatter things
 To pieces, or can penetrate within
 Through their void spaces and so break them up,
 Nature will not permit the dissolution
 Of anything to be seen. Again, if time
 Utterly destroys, consuming all the substance
 Of whatsoever it removes from sight
 As the years lapse, out of what then does Venus
 Bring back into the light of life the race
 Of living creatures each after its kind?

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[More information](#)

10

LUCRETIUS

Or, once brought back, whence can the daedal earth
 Nourish and increase them, giving food to each
 After its kind? Whence do its own fountains
 And far-drawn rivers from without keep full 230
 The sea? Whence does the aether feed the stars?
 For infinite past time and lapse of days
 Surely must long since have consumed all things
 Formed of a body that must die. But if
 Throughout that period of time long past
 Elements have existed out of which
 Our world of things is composed and remade,
 Assuredly such atoms must be endowed
 With an immortal nature: none of them
 Therefore can turn to nothing. Then again
 The same force and the same cause would destroy
 All things without distinction, were it not
 That an eternal substance held them fast,
 A substance interwoven part with part
 By bonds more or less close. For without doubt 240
 A mere touch would be cause enough for death,
 Seeing that any least amount of force
 Must needs dissolve the texture of such things,
 None of which had an everlasting body.
 But in fact since the mutual fastenings
 Of the atoms are dissimilar, and their substance
 Is everlasting, things endure with body
 Uninjured, till some force arrive which proves
 Strong enough to dissolve the texture of each.
 Therefore no single thing ever returns
 To nothing, but at their disruption all
 Pass back into the particles of matter.
 Lastly the rain-showers perish, when the Sky-father 250
 Has flung them into the lap of mother Earth.
 But then luxuriant crops spring up, and boughs
 Are green upon the trees; the trees themselves
 Grow, and with fruits are laden: from this source
 Moreover both our own race and the race