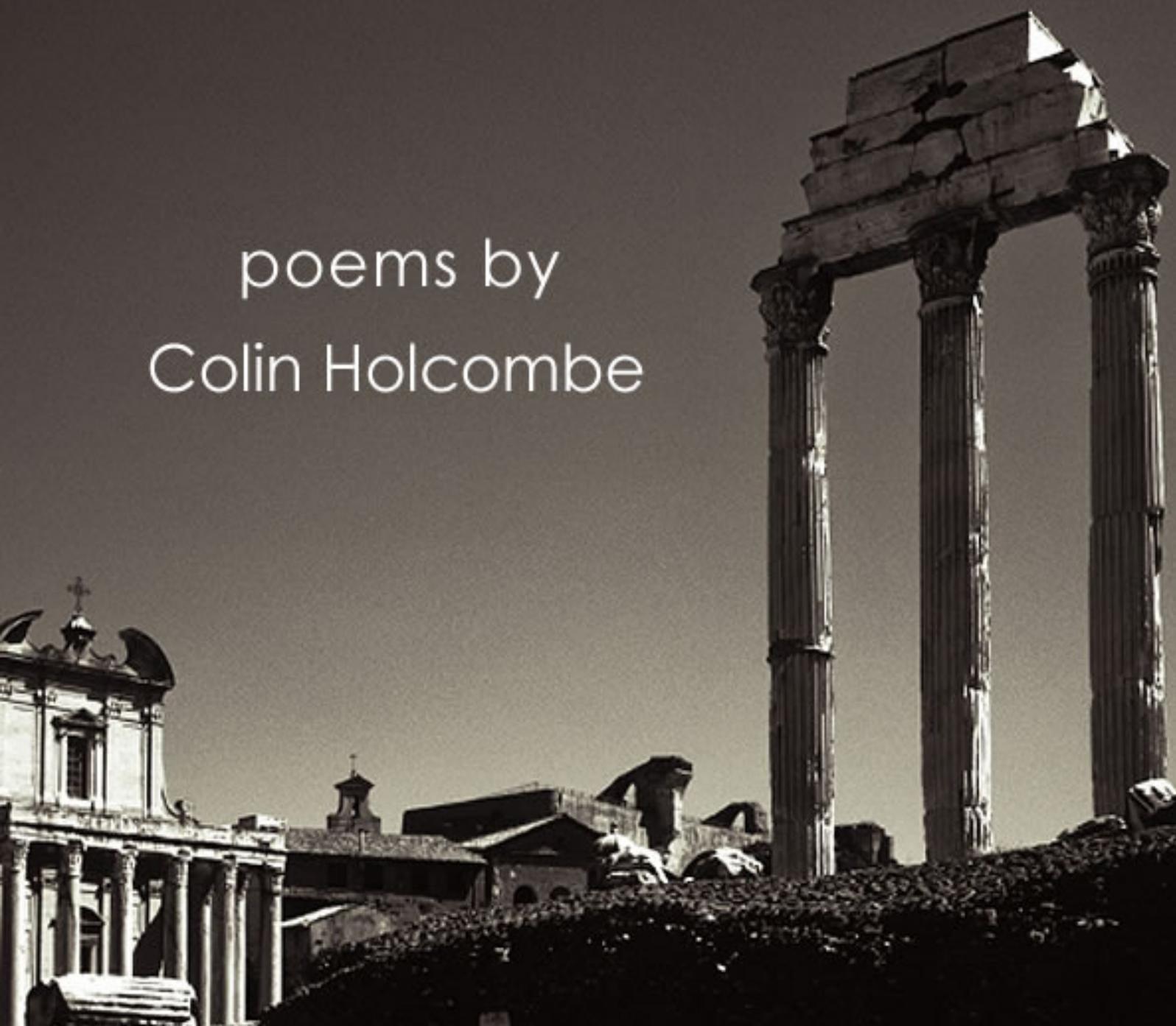


Julius Caesar

poems by
Colin Holcombe



Julius Caesar

Colin John Holcombe

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Julius Caesar: a Series of Poems

by Colin John Holcombe

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CAIUS JULIUS CAESAR: AN INTRODUCTION

No one's fool — that's what the portraits suggest, the few authentic busts we have of Julius Caesar: a sagacious mouth, a strong jaw, a vexed and rather biting look about the eyes. Not a soldier's face, but an autocrat's and a good deal else — a scheming, guarded and long-headed man who was poet, jurist, historian, orator, politician and military genius. Also a bon viveur and art collector, an elegant man-about-town, bisexual very probably, but always popular with women.

Who was this man, who created the Roman Empire — or at least set in train the events that his great-nephew used to centralise power? There is much that is contradictory. He was famed for his clemency — there were no proscriptions in the first triumvirate, or when he was appointed Dictator — but he could be enormously cruel when necessary. He beheaded the entire Senate of the Venetii, massacred the helpless Usipetes and Tencteri, cut off the right hands of all men at arms in Uxellodunum. He seemed careless of money, borrowing and spending fortunes like water, but his object in conquering Gaul was as much plunder as fame. When Consul in 59 B.C. he had promoted laws against extortion, but as Provincial Governor he stripped the country bare — selling up to a million of its inhabitants into slavery.

Caesar was primarily a man of action. His great Commentaries are propaganda, with none of the chatty reflections on events that Cicero left behind in his letters. Caesar may have written poetry as a young man, but what survived was suppressed by Augustus as unworthy of his illustrious forebear. Caesar spoke in the Senate, and was obviously an ambitious man, and always one to watch. He brought Pompey and Crassus together in the first triumvirate, but stayed the go-between, the junior partner. He conquered more land in Gaul than Pompey had in the east, but he was nominally Pompey's lieutenant and might have remained so if wiser counsels had prevailed in the Senate over his return. With hindsight we can see that Caesar possessed in the highest degree the qualities needed for power: political acumen that gained and played off the support of the moneyed classes, oratory to win senator and foot soldier to his cause, and a command of the best-trained army in the world. But even after he

crossed the Rubicon, and Pompey fled Italy, the majority did not give much for his chances. Cicero, who had a genuine affection for Caesar, went over to join the rival in Greece. He returned after Pompey's death, and was entreated to provide respectability to the shabby bunch of adventurers that made up Caesar's administration but stayed aloof, writing but taking no active part in politics.

Caesar was born in 100 B.C., into a period of great turbulence in the Mediterranean world. His father had devoted himself to public service, affiancing his son to a family that was simply equestrian and wealthy, intending no more than comfort and respectability for the Caesar line. But the young Caius revoked those plans. He married Cornelia, daughter of the current leader of the Populares, the party represented by the Marius serving his sixth Consulship in the very year Caesar was born. The general had fought great campaigns in Gaul and north Africa, earning the title of third founder of Rome, but was compromised by gang warfare in his sixth consulship and retired from public life soon after. But in the Social Wars that followed a few years later, when the inhabitants of Italy took up arms to fight for the same rights as those of Roman citizens, the now elderly Marius was recalled to lead the Roman armies. Successes came more readily to his younger colleague Sulla, however, who made himself the supporter of the opposing Optimates and thus the inveterate enemy of Marius and the Populares. Ignoring precedent, Sulla marched on Rome in 88 B.C. to impose his wishes, murdering several citizens, and Marius himself returned a year later to root out Sulla's supporters. Dozens were murdered and their property seized. Marius became Consul for a seventh time but then died of natural causes. His place was taken by Cinna, who was Consul continuously through to 84 B.C. But this leader of the Populares was murdered in a mutiny, and Sulla, arriving back in Italy after long wars in the east against Mithridates VI of Pontus, made short work of the opposition. Three thousand Samnite prisoners were butchered, and another terrible proscription ordered — this time of the supporters of Marius, and indeed of wealthy individuals generally, as Sulla needed land and money to settle his 120,000 veterans.

Seventeen hundred were executed and their property seized. Caesar was brought before Sulla and told to renounce his wife. The young man, whose talent was noticeable enough for him to be given a second chance, refused and went into hiding. With cunning and good fortune he survived.

Representations were made, and the young man was pardoned and sent abroad to help keep order in Rome's eastern colonies. The Mithridatic Wars had created many of these, and the problems were always the same: to keep the populace in check while a horde of magistrates and tax collectors settled to renegotiate their lands, rights and possessions.

Caesar's rise was slow, but all the time he was abroad travelling as a dandy and aristocrat in the eastern Mediterranean, and more so as Pompey's hardbitten lieutenant in Gaul, Caesar kept a close eye on Rome. Here lay the real power, and had to be suborned in an outward respect for its institutions. Until the middle of the second century B.C., Rome had many of the attributes of a Greek city state. Power was exercised by magistrates annually elected. The path to high office was clearly laid down, with minimum age and experience applying for the offices of state, from Consul downwards, to ensure that judgement was exercised by those most capable of acting wisely. The rights of the common people were protected by elected Tribunes, who could veto the legislature. The Senate, composed of elderly patricians who had distinguished themselves in the arts of war and peace, debated issues and advised as required. Only in times of extreme emergency was this complex system of devolved and balanced power set aside by the appointment of a Dictator, and then only for a limited period.

But the city had never entirely conformed to these ideals, and by the time of Caesar's birth the machinery of government was practically defunct. Italy was gorged with foreign spoil and slaves, which provided for the fortunate few a life very different from the frugal self-reliance of the farmers and landowners who once formed the backbone of the Roman state. Cheap supplies of grain had bankrupted small farmers, who had either sold themselves into slavery on the big estates to escape crushing debts, or fled to Rome to join the rabble of dispossessed that was so easily whipped up into dangerous mobs by demagogues and unscrupulous politicians. Those who were rich grew enormously more so, whether as members of the old patrician class who relied on their increasing lands to build villa after villa in Rome or the surrounding countryside, or the new equestrian class who formed the bulk of tax collectors and moneylenders. Broadly speaking, the two classes were represented by the Optimates (aristocratic) and the Populares (democratic) parties, but the groupings were more in the nature of factions, centring on dominating individuals and motivated throughout by greed and self-advancement. Bribery and jury-rigging were widespread,

and those who stood for office favoured their patrons when elected to power.

Into this shabby and dangerous world, Caesar advanced with what seems light-hearted cynicism. He became notorious for his free spending, his debts, his adulteries and good living. He switched sides repeatedly, making political and financial deals precisely as it suited him. He was distrusted, disliked and reviled, but stayed popular with the masses and those in power.

Many of his associates fell by the wayside, were prosecuted, exiled, murdered but Caesar picked his way through. His reserves, physical and mental, were extraordinary. He was in his forties when he took command in Gaul — not as a palace governor but a field general, exposing himself to the dangers and hardships of the common soldier. Mistakes were made in the early months, but Caesar quickly earned the respect of his troops and became one of the great military commanders of all time. His Commentaries hardly mention the lieutenants who helped win his victories, but Caesar's achievements were real enough. He took risks, but the reliance on Fortuna, his guiding star, was always rewarded. Astute enough to evade Sulla's proscriptions, to escape from the Miletus pirates, to survive the vengeance of husbands, to beat Vercingetorix, to survive Thapsus and Dyrrhachium, the victory at Pharsalus was even more staggering. Pompey was unquestionably the greatest general of his day, a careful master-strategist who held all the cards: a larger and fresher army, the services of Caesar's best lieutenant, and the choice of ground. But Pompey's cavalry was broken on Caesar's fourth column, and Pompey fled to Egypt, where he was murdered on arrival. The Senate's expectations were confounded, and Caesar imposed his terms: Consul and Dictator for life. That he aimed for a crown is likely, but this was the rock that broke him. Neither the populace nor the Senate would accept a king, and Caesar was obliged to remain first among equals. He could not gain the approval of Rome without appearing sometimes without bodyguards, and the senators of all factions seized on one such occasion to cut him down.

His great-nephew Augustus would be more circumspect, but Caesar was tired and contemptuous of the narrow self-interests of his peers. In five years he'd fought campaigns in Gaul, Egypt, Spain and Italy: campaigns with horrific consequences for the Republic — tens of thousands killed at

Thapsus, Pharsalus, Alexandria, Dyrrachium, Munda . . . the rain of blood seemed endless while the Senate did nothing but shift and pontificate. Perhaps in the end the exhibitionism, the need to be different which had nearly wrecked his career at its outset, and which he had carefully suppressed, now came to the fore. On the eve of his departure for Parthia, to emulate or exceed the conquests of Alexander, and with the young Macedonian queen perhaps waiting for him in Egypt, the fifty-five year old Caesar showed his hand and was assassinated. One extraordinary life ended, and another, even more improbable, that of an obscure and sickly young man called Octavian, was about to begin.

WHAT I REMEMBER

What I remember of that boyhood shore,
with the high waves breaking, was more and more
lifted together in the heavy swell,
was exultation: fear as well.

I fastened on that, was composed and neat,
always respectful — in the street

I did not go running, make any noise:
that's what they noticed, the other boys.

As Julii we were middling — not rich, not poor,
but ancient and patrician — father wore
Tyrian to his toga when out of doors
attendant on Senate and the settled chores
that came with our ruling the vast lands east.

I saw myself there as elected priest,
Pontifex, even, and every cause
lift in the rapture of their applause.

Yet apart from that — nothing. I was betrothed
to one called Cossutia. At fifteen roved
curious through bodies to the curled-up toes
under the shyness and the small, damp clothes.

100 - 92 B.C. Caesar's Boyhood

Caius Julius Caesar was born in 100 B.C. The Julii claimed mythical descent from Venus and the ancient founders of Rome. The Caesar line had been active in the Punic Wars (the name Caesar possibly deriving from the Carthaginian for elephant) but was somewhat impoverished and undistinguished by this time. Caius was given a sound education, introduced to women in approved brothels, and prepared for a role in public administration.

CAIUS, CHOOSE

Yes, it was difficult. Detachments went
prompt on the order: were backwards sent
Through battlegrounds changing, and still the cost
mounted in cousins or fathers lost.
My own, though, survived, was much abroad,
though wielding more influence than the sword.
A strong man, quiet. Said, 'yes, he'd heard' —
But for me though silence: nothing stirred.
Aunt Julia was the voluble. Came
sometimes with Marius, then a household name.
Mother I think fretted, shook her head:
drudged on for family, me, she said.
So: Caius of the Julii by marriage allied
to the first of families was thereby tied
into the Populares. If father's pride
was first the Republic, he had died.
After the obsequies and orations
as I stood there vexed with my relations —
I spoke to Aunt Julia to air my views:
she stopped me, said, "Caius, you choose."

92- 85 B.C. Civil Unrest

Three incidents among many in this dark period of civil unrest, war and conscription: Italian cities won Roman citizenship after a bloody two-year Social War. Mithridates VI of Pontus massacred 80,000 Roman civilians in the eastern provinces and required four years of hard campaigning to bring to book. Marius, uncle by marriage to Caius, exiled to north Africa in 88 B.C., returned a year later and in a drunken stupor randomly murdered Sullan supporters.

EPISTLE TO COSSUTIA

Dutiful and presentable, if no
great beauty — yes, Cossutia, so
you were. True, but not a wife
for me, my prospects, type of life.
You see my almost life-companion:
all the time I had naught to stand on.
What was settlement when Father died
if we, the Julii, were not allied
to power, to Cinna? You know the crown
we bear of Venus — kingship down
to the present, treacherous, hard-fought days,
what we hunger for in praise.
So understand: we played together
with hearts and hands that hot June weather,
and I was happy, but saw your eyes:
the hazard in them, hurt, the lies.
Cossutia for me it only meant
not marriage but a muled consent.
Whatever you may hope for, or yet may be,
I ask you, Cossutia: remember me.

84 B.C. Caesar marries Cornelia

A year after his father died, as Proprætor of Asia in 85 BC, Caius broke with Cossutia and made a political marriage with Cornelia, daughter of the Populares leader Cinna. Though training for the priesthood, Caesar was looking for greater advancement — until Sulla's return was announced and Cinna was murdered by rebellious troops.

TO CORNELIA: GREETINGS

Hunted by troops, dogs, I'd stayed
too long by farms and granaries: paid
by capture. Advance the denarii
to him who bears this letter. I
am middling, yes mending, and if confined
am not uncomfortable. I do not mind
if you are waiting. But have it paid,
in full and promptly: this is their trade.
As for me, hope is fugitive
as smoke upon the capitol. If
lists continue, all our cost
is made up in the rivals lost.
Aunt Julia understands. Be bold
enough to talk to her. Of the old
party of the Populares there is one,
your husband, whom they'd still call son.
Cornelia, wife, be circumspect
but not discouraged. A ship's not wrecked
by force of tempest but by running slack:
with blood behind us there is no way back.

81 B.C. Sulla's Proscriptions

Caesar fled the proscriptions, but was hunted down and captured, only securing release by bribing his captors. His aunt Julia had lost all influence, but friends, including the Vestal Virgins, made representation to Sulla, who found him a position on the staff of Marcus Minucius Thermos, Proprætor of Asia.

MERE GIRLS THEY ARE

My name defends me. I kick my heels,
sporting my toga, when there steals
at last on the menials that here's a lamb,
be glad to have a butt to ram.
By the Gods, they do it! Not a Greek
who doesn't inveigle and flaunt his cheek,
his haunch, buttocks, the thing between:
I watch them hourly delve and preen.
Sometimes it masters: the toughies come
bursting in willing. I have their scum
fasten on my body as though in heat.
We dally, hug. Our two mouths meet,
the warmth of that emptying as the limbs sag,
the thing ridiculous — with a limp last wag
it flops from me, harmless. The aching rasps
I drink down with passion in hot, fierce gasps.
Mere girls they are once spasm ceases:
my adjutant lays out the silver pieces:
but I unbridle and have these so-called men
do it and do it and do it again.

80 B.C. Caesar the Young Dandy

Since the parties centred more on personalities than policies, outrageous defamation of character was accepted as part of the rough-and-tumble of Roman politics. But the taint of homosexuality, or more particularly of the degrading aspects of some homosexual behaviour, never entirely left Caesar, despite attempts by Augustus to exhibit a sanitised image of the Empire's founding father.

BITHYNIA

As a king, perfumed, of the Pontic Sea,
Nicomedes, I ask you take care of me!
I was young when I came, and was undone
by your kindness, customs, your talk of son.
Disrobe myself! Dance! Display my gender!
Filled up with wine I wagged my member
up, down, and proud in its bedded curls,
my pilae not lost like the breasts of girls,
who upholster for dancing but desire selection.
No, I was hung for your tarried inspection.
Great king, I have done as no Roman should
to make myself humble, a mere thing of wood,
besmirching the body, my pursuit of fame,
pride in ancestry, even my name.
Where are the soldiers and dispensation,
the promises made of a single nation?
I came to you twice, King, in soft ways, not war,
treating you gravely, by patrician law:
whatever may serve for the sodomies
I beg you think further, Nicomedes.

80 B.C. Military service in Asia. The Bithynia Scandal

Caesar met the renowned catamite Nicomedes IV of Bithynia when sent by the Proprætor of Asia to ask for assistance in the blockade of Mitylene. The young man, tired from his journey, slept in the king's room and committed some indiscretion that was later seized upon by political enemies. That he had disgraced his dignitas, the natural authority and personal standing of a Roman citizen, presumably formed the basis of the accusations, not the homosexual act itself.

MYTYLENE

So to continue: your decision,
Propraetor of Asia, to give position
to one inexperienced, to have him fall
uncounted with those beyond recall,
was, I think, clever. But months of running
have given me too much a mind for cunning.
Too well I know the harsh hearts of men
to trust them much further: no, not again.
I fought as I had to. I gave no quarter.
Being so much in the way of slaughter,
abandoned to fury, I found my feet,
didn't I, in the melee? I liked the heat
engendered by exertion, display of muscle
in hacking, thrusting; the stabbing tussle
as the breath leaves bodies, as swords go through,
the entrails spilling and the blood too.
For that's what it comes to, the battle plan
leaving unwinded not a serving man.
But thank you for the honour, this odd crown
may lead in time to some renown.

80 B.C. Caesar given the Crown of Mitylene

The dapper young aristocrat became a soldier, taking part in the storming of Mitylene in Lesbos, which had unwisely supported Mithridates VI in his war with Rome. Here Caesar won the corona civica, the wreath of oak leaves awarded for saving the life of a comrade in battle. It was a very considerable honour, and showed that, whatever his appearance or inclinations, Caesar had the making of a courageous and dependable soldier.

A NOTE TO MINUCIUS THERMUS

Yes, one's sensibilities are bruised,
a trifle, Minucius. They are used
a touch indelicately in the cleft
wouldn't you say, so to bleed to death?
They all of them do. I've seen their eyes
fix their last on the hard-blue skies,
Even on the first day, before the heaving
ends with the bodies burnt at evening.
Most regrettable, but new ones come,
are stripped down and held, the soft-haired bum
is thonged and extended, the breasts undone:
a feast for the victor, for anyone
who built like a donkey rams in straddled
on bodies similar, being raddled
the like by warfare — so huge in, blunt.
The gladness delivered in each short grunt
is of wives, of children, of homesteads now
to be taken apart by this blunt-nosed plough —
fattened to death as with furious harms
war gathers and glints through the upland farms.

79 B.C. Realities of War

Mitylene surrendered, and its women provided the usual amenities to troops. As aesthete and a great sympathiser with women, Caesar could not have escaped horror at the situation. Nor realisation that the abdication and death of Sulla in Rome opened the way to murderous civil wars in which every bestiality inflicted on Greeks could be visited on his own countrymen.

RECRIMINATIONS

That's not the length of it, worst of it, no,
in the long night silent, and fondled, so
miserable, helpless as when the body
is pawed at, defiled, disgraced and shoddy.
But not of my doing, but because I dared,
wine-raddled, to think that an old man cared.
Whatever I do now, the smiles come through,
dirtying the family, and even you
Cornelia: a torment, a long uncoiling
of a serpent, intrusive, greased and soiling.
'Caius is a catamite: who'd have known?
A strange lot, the Julii, as this has shown.'
So the women I service. I bring them off
like sows for basting in a common trough
and as I stick them the suckling thought
comes of Bithynia, of what was wrought
on a raw boy, not practised, who tried to please
by you, Nicomedes, of perfumed ease.
The hurts I continue as circumstance
is dark in the breast with remembrance.

79 B.C. In Pectore Memoriam

Caesar never entirely lived down the stories of his liaison with Nicomedes, despite his womanising later and extraordinary toughness as a military commander. The accusations, made in the Senate, or in the ribald songs of his troops, seem to have angered him to an extent unusual, given that homosexuality carried no particular stigma in Roman times, and that love for boys inspired a good deal more poetry than that for women.

AS I PLEASE

Prinking myself out in tasselled ease
the bodies attend me as I please.
What shall I take — young women, the boys?
Both I am thinking; there are no more Troys.
Dignitas wearies: the freebooting east
has turned my furlough to languid feast.
Hips to inveigle, spread out, squeeze
to the last drop of pleasure. Even to tease
the prim, the raunchy, the delicate-eyed
is to ruffle a little that haughty pride.
Let me attend you; that dress undone?
Well, that can happen to anyone.
So beautiful, so trusting. You do not say?
Mistress of fortune, what must I pay?
No, no, good soldier, let me be gone.
What, with that nest egg you're sitting on?
Enough then of ways — let all that's past
be idle or lost: it does not last:
Myself, I look kindly on these casual lays,
For soon will come soldiering, and harder days.

78 B.C. Footloose in Asia Minor

Caesar was now a young man on the staff of the Proprætor of Asia, with considerable freedom to indulge himself. Fidelity was hardly to be expected, and indeed Caesar never made any pretence of being the devoted husband, or of being strictly heterosexual. He wore an effeminate tunic with fringed sleeves, and his male lovers appear at regular intervals, one of the last being a certain Rufio, to whom he entrusted the command of three legions in Egypt, Cleopatra notwithstanding.

FROM COSSUTIA: THOUGHTS

To husband though you're not: thoughts and sad
greetings. The hours as we had
frugal of happiness hang in the air:
fugitive, they follow me everywhere.
It is over. But I know you, Caius — of
soft words, consoling, they are not of love,
but pipings far off, Theocritan sighs
to have me content you: delicate lies.
Do not mistake me. I'm smiling at
all those flummeries you have learnt off pat.
You wanted me yielding, as soft as sponge,
did you, compliant, above all young?
Well, as to that I am not offended. All
I do ask is you sometimes call.
I hope that you prosper, and even gone
will think of you further and travelling on.
Remember me, Caius. I shall count your stays
in our hearts here as fortunate, all the days.
Spurn me or keep me, the country you go
to is warmly occasioned by what I know.

78 B.C. Cossutia Remembers

Little is known of Cossutia after her rejection, and her comments here are speculation only. But patrician women were not Victorian misses. They received a sound education, and exercised much independence in and out of marriage — a fact lamented by Rome's moralists who saw paterfamilias authority undermined by women's increasing love of wealth, pleasure and intrigue.

HARD DAYS

Hurts and rough skin the raw days bring.
Out in the wind the sinews sing.
Rolls of soft living are cut away,
the animal cornered, made to stay.
An army is always of one accord
or should be if pilum is like the sword.
A huge, bristling mass invests the ground,
rolls on the orders by which it's bound.
So: we're marching in harness. Hills go by.
the straggles of olives, and heat-flecked sky,
fall into squaddies, to ordered laws.
The cities receive us with thin applause.
Each day its vistas. In camps I find
my world to be lifted and unconfined.
Each ground now is different, the mind runs free
as the wind in its whispers to Rome of me.
Armies are means that I shall not miss;
there is no momentum equal to this.
Not in soft living will I find my place
but fortune that hardens in each tough face.

78 B.C. Military Service in Cilicia.

Caesar joined the army of the governor of Cilicia, who was engaged on a campaign against pirates. He also raised a detachment on his own initiative and at his own expense in the wars with Mithridates. News of Sulla's death returned him to Rome, where he launched a spirited prosecution of Dolabella, a Sullan Governor arraigned for extortion. The prosecution was unsuccessful but added to Caesar's reputation as a man to watch.

THE LAWS SUFFICE

Fortune's intrusive, is large, my friend,
but not so extensive it has no end.
That you went further, would keep for pay
me from whom Furies must look away
was bold of you, brave, who should have known —
my dear ones, my careless — as nails crunch bone,
all probings of person will carry through:
as hurt me you wanted, I shall now hurt you.
And harder, to exhaust, be taken in
that a furious descant of pain begin:
fiercer, unending, a disembodied seething
to gladden my inmost sensate being.
And more than that even, or into dreams
stretched to insanity, to such extremes
I shall imagine as your severings writhe
that terror is with us, is brought off live.
And if I am sorry, I shall not conceal
disappointment you cannot feel
how the body once brazen is made as mud
or the horror spurting out with blood.

75 B.C. Caesar captured by Pirates

Caesar, returning from Bithynia where he may have hoped to benefit from the will of the late Nicomedes was captured by pirates near Miletus and imprisoned for 38 days. Outwardly the young Caesar made light of the incident, voluntarily increasing his ransom from twenty to fifty talents, reading them his literary compositions and generally lording it over his captors. But on arrival of ransom and release, Caesar returned to seize the pirates and have them executed — illegally: their throats were cut and they were crucified.

A VISIT TO RHODES

Tardy is power, and if it shows
it does so for reason of the ground it owes.
Is thereby resented, because imposed
rather than purchased, or is so supposed.
That is why words, which are puffs of air,
carry to a man's most inward lair.
If the pilum is swifter it has no ears
for the heart, the thoughts, the comfortless fears.
Who can have triumphs equal to these?
A thought starts in silence, and then with ease
rolls into periods and the ending clause
comes swift, comes crushing, to a gasped applause.
And afterwards triumph — our phrases heard
long throughout Rome, to their very word.
Smiles that go on: each successful case
has litigant smiling in his rightful place.
Therefore my journey. He inclined his head,
the courteous tutor, to me he said,
"Like Cicero, I hope you shed
some lustre on learning from this bald head."

74 B.C. Caesar visits Apollonius Molon of Rhodes

Oratory was essential to success in public office, and Caesar travelled to study briefly under Apollonius of Rhodes, the greatest teacher of his day. Apollonius had been mentor to Cicero, the only man to outshine Caesar as advocate, and with whom he shared an interest in literature and fine living. Oratory was a craft, practised under set rules, and developed into rhetoric, at which Cicero also excelled.

MAN-ABOUT-TOWN

Yes, hauteurs deny it and long cloaks hide,
but demurely, Caius, the legs divide
on wet grass, on marble, on small divans
extraordinary the posture of this wretched glans
that pops up, a god, and will drink his measure
down past witterings of any pleasure.

That's the smack of it: I send them packing
and back they return with still more clacking
of being restrained and never scratching
the eyes out of others husband-snatching,
reposing such soft and sorrowful breasts:
saying, 'Caius, I forgive you, and here it rests.'

And all of them at it. What a sea
of virtue should then engulf the city!

Not one with libido or close-plucked hair,
but matrons, they say, with a modest air
doing their best, even conscience laden,
when not demure as a vestal maiden.

Such endless protesting lays the stola aside,
and once so divested — how they ride!

73 B.C. Caesar Returns to Rome.

To fill a vacancy in the College of Pontiffs caused by the death of his uncle Caius Cotta, Caesar crossed the Adriatic in a small boat and, once arrived, sought office as Military Tribune of the People, an important step in his political career. More than that, the election brought him back to Rome, to become a man-about-town, the advocate of the Populares cause, and the correspondent in innumerable divorce cases.

THE ASPIRING POLITICIAN

Well then, tell me how to ban
my money from ending as courtesan;
how to ensure the getting and bending
of rules is payment for only spending
on clients of importance, not hangers-on:
appointments of favour when we have won.
All eyes look kindly on the liberal man
let he who can canter catch as catch can.
Yes, it is ruinous; yes, it descends
to falsehoods, bribery, to having friends
only for influence, for amounts they'll lend.
All of which makes for a motley blend
of talent and usury, yet who'd shun
high jinks the length that these junkets run?
Is Caesar a madcap? So let them think:
consign me, let them, to the general sink
of rent boys got up as rutting matrons,
of roistering among the unplucked capons.
Fortune is hazard, and he plays best
who takes what is wanted, and spurns the rest.

71 B.C. Caesar in Rome

Frivolous as he seemed, Caesar was busy building contacts in a Rome more financially and politically insecure by the year. A vast urban poor was oppressed by high rents, appalling living conditions and heavy conscription. Large areas of the countryside had been ravaged by slave revolts, and increasing numbers of desperate men turned to piracy, brigandage and urban terrorism. Debt was endemic in the upper classes as increased amounts of money had to be invested in the competition for high office, promising huge rewards for the successful few and ruin for the great majority.

THE PARTY-GOER

Ours is the worst of it. Though they say
they're the imposed on, they have their sway.
Warmly they lean to and with breathy sighs
entreat us to shipwreck in their thighs.
Us whom they turn to, hip to hip,
stubbornly even wet bottoms grip,
urge to be opened, harried inside
far, far down on the darkening tide
that pulses the body out in passion's spate,
withholding and savouring its heavy freight:
all that remains of the muzzy fire
as gently, severally, the dreams expire.
Day long and night long, as parties end
at dawn by the river, the nightingales send
to the last one singing, homeward-weighted
with wine and such music, their golden, sated
rich plangent voices, rallying and falling,
drifting with echoes of the peddlers calling.
Down past the Capitol and the empty street
the air seems suddenly close and sweet.

70 B.C. Life in Rome

Romans were sexually broader and more candid than us — in their acts, associations, what they talked about. Women of the upper classes enjoyed great freedom. Divorce was easy, and many had the dowries, looks and connections to be sought many times in marriage, sometimes acquiescing, sometimes (like Catullus's Clodia) remaining splendidly their own creatures. With women like this, as with the wives, daughters and lovers of friends, or soon-to-be friends, Caesar created liaisons that kept even a world-weary Rome amused and wondering.

SPAIN

What did I do then to earn this waste
of cactus and thistle, through which in haste
this Caius Julius Caesar is sent
scurrying further than forebears went.
Gades to Corduba, riding horse
day long and night long through the winding course
of hills and scrublands, without stint or pause,
curbing the troubles he does not cause.
What is he doing? He is thirty-one.
This the age when he had won,
Alexander, his kingdoms in the further east:
the thinking on which I have not ceased
Ever, not once. Well known in Rome,
for acumen and his small country home
where statesmen attend him, who smiling wait
decisions upon his affairs of state.
I am here without purpose, or even trace
of solid advancement. An empty place,
far from my countrymen, a breathing-space
among a hirsute and dark-eyed race.

69 B.C. Cornelia Dies. Quaestar in Further Spain

Caesar stayed in Rome until 69 B.C., when he broke with precedent by organising a state funeral for his aunt Julia, enemy of the prevailing Optimates administration. His wife Cornelia died, but left him a daughter, Julia, to whom he became inordinately attached, marrying her eventually to Pompey. Caesar now turned to his career, obtaining the post of Quaestar in Farther Spain, a tiring and ill-rewarded position that required continual travel but gave him a seat in the Senate.

A GREAT ADVENTURE

In provinces bristling with rough cities
up in the north plains it surely is
not beyond one Caius Caesar
offered Fortuna so to seize her.
With Cremona and Patvium only four
hundred milia, and with a law
of soldiers marching and a jubilant crowd
I think the Senate would have bowed,
sovereign and hateful, their gravitas
smiling until they also amass
conscripts in legions to overthrow
this latest, most foolish of the Scipio.
Instead I've come home. And Rome is best
for someone needing his port of rest,
money and friends. Will Pompey make
a quaestar pay dearly for one mistake?
I doubt it. Not him. Our Consul is wise.
Beyond peradventure, his soft blue eyes
will flicker a moment to watch and use
one who made much of a simple ruse.

68 B.C. Caesar visits northern Italy.

On his way back from Spain, Caesar called into the colonies of northern Italy, then agitating for full citizen rights. Possibly he considered raising an army to march on Rome, but the Senate under Pompey as Consul realised the danger and stopped the last two legions from leaving Italy for the Mithridatic Wars. Caesar returned to Rome a private citizen, as Pompey himself had done earlier at the conclusion of his own campaigns

ENOUGH

Close up, the grossnesses disgust.
Too much we have of it and thrust
ourselves to a fumbling, a bleary kiss
after the belchings, the wind and piss.
Hence the treacheries I complain
of, and also the lengthening stain
in a body renewed, its foul expulsions,
its purgings, retchings, plain revulsions.
Unpleasant to lovers and I think
offensive to gods who take the stink
as unwashed of us, each place of rest
besmirched by buttocks, mouth and breast.
Therefore I think we should count all thought
abhorrent that comes with its gender taut,
unwiped, the pubes taken out
remind too much of the truffling snout.
True: I am old and I make my peace
with Venus to have these alarums cease.
Wife, friends I want, clear light and palms:
some armistice out of these wide arms.

67 B.C. Caesar Tires of Rome

Caesar now began to think more seriously about his career. He needed a wife, for status and possibly emotional stability. He was over thirty, moreover, and began to tire of pleasures. He should now think which men or associations would further his career. Crassus, whose wife he had already seduced, was the obvious choice, but would mean closer ties with the Optimates, the men who had murdered his friends and family.

EPISTLE TO THE SULLANS

Yes, Pompeia, scattered pieces
thin as tesserae, as summer leases:
let me accept that. I rest my case
ask you repose on my handsome face
your looks, confidence. Your consent
is also the family's. Our descent
is a long one, there is no trace
in us of any menial race.
Also this urging: on every side
power of the Optimates is gratified
by court and by Senate, but nationwide
there will come sharply another tide.
Gaul the Nearer, the Further, Illyricum
clamour for suffrage, for change to come.
It may be the electorate soon forgets,
but take me to better hedge your bets.
Who in Rome is this man's match
in courage, acuteness, fast dispatch?
I assure you, dear wife, as days progress,
you will call out, "Oh husband yes!"

67 B.C. Marries Pompeia

Caesar settled in Rome and there married Pompeia, granddaughter of his great enemy Sulla. It was a political marriage, but served him until he became Praetor in 62 B.C. and could divorce Pompeia over a scandal with Publius Clodius. Caesar also became the associate of Pompey, thereby drawing closer to the real ruler of the Republic and sowing the seeds for the first triumvirate that was to follow eight years later.

FAREWELL TO THE PRESENT

Farewell for the present, Pompeius called
Magnus and wisely. In many walled
cities of Asia the people wait
impatient with riches for your estate.
Fair winds, swift voyage, but do not gloat
too much on appointment. They turn their coat,
Tribunes and Senate. I would not count
on many for favours hereabout.
But your friends I hope you will bear in mind,
our counsel to you, and each month find
intelligence to make a helpful sum
to act on, or not, when the time is come.
The Senate will exhort you make an end of wars,
for which they have reasons, as you have yours.
Also you'll note that the tax farming offers
are not now for Crassus but the general coffers.
The which we agree with, and have no positions,
on the check board, of course, of your conditions.
No, nothing at all. Your Crassus mopes
but works away manfully, smiles and hopes.

65 B.C. Letter from Crassus

Caesar now became the protégé of the enormously wealthy Crassus, whose money made him Censor, Curule Aedile and then Pontifex Maximus — for none of which Caesar had the necessary attributes of age and distinguished service. Pompey meanwhile, having cleared the Mediterranean of pirates, was nominated for overall command in the Mithridatic Wars, an appointment Caesar and Crassus supported, seeing opportunities for themselves when Rome's first citizen was abroad.

A WORD WITH LUCIUS SERGIUS CATALINA

It did seem rather desperate,
Sergius, I thought, to hazard state,
wealth and family in what
Scarcely was a well-made plot,
now was it, really? — prey
to what a dozen fools might say
in bath or villa. Such ill luck
you call it when our Consul struck
much as he had to. Cicero,
piebald eagle born a crow,
believe me, had to place his spies
anywhere but to source those lies.
By the Gods, really, my dear fellow, you
had not an inkling of what to do,
but sat there confounded as the plan was scotched.
Harangued, argued, glowered, watched
the action fade out, and that vain-of-phrase,
the puffed-up Cicero, ring down praise
on himself, the Senate, as though he must
at all points save the communal trust.

63 B.C. *The Cataline Conspiracy*

The bankrupt patrician Lucius Sergius Catalina engineered a coup d'état, which failed when Cicero, acting as Consul, drove the conspirators into the open in one of the great glories of Roman oratory. Catalina fled Rome, raised an army in Etruria, which was met and horribly slaughtered with no prisoners taken. Crassus and Caesar, initially sympathetic to impoverished aristocrats, now distanced themselves from the conspiracy, facing a suspicious Cato with increasing rancour.

EPISTLE TO POMPEIA

Frankly, Pompeia, this young Clodius —
a ruffian but a jolly fellow — does
no end of business in the name
from which we profit, as we blame
him of course for some score minors
with patrimonies scattered, and sore vaginas,
clotted with blood to the cloacal parts.
For general mischief that sparks and smarts
all over Rome, a dark place now,
fearful, and hazardous. Yes, and how
wildly they look and seem to quake
as the Pontifex fingers some new mistake.
Good for my enemies — the Censor's descent,
new Cato the skinful, the turbulent;
also one Cicero, but he must speak
without connections: he has no clique.
So then farewell. We shall meet
through many more that will fuel your heat.
If not, given such rank and beauty,
I list the men who may just suit you...

62 B.C. Caesar made Praetor. The Clodius Scandal.

Publius Clodius, an aristocrat of old family, was a bullyboy, profligate and rabble-rouser. When he was caught in Caesar's house apparently making an assignation with Pompeia at the sacred festival of Bona Dea, Caesar seized the opportunity to divorce his wife. Crassus bribed the jury in the trial that followed, securing acquittal and bringing Clodius into the Crassus-Caesar cabal.

CATO

Virtue may seem a thousand shields
to you, dear Marcus, but inspection yields
a different consensus — citizen,
Porcius Cato, austere of men.
How many the slaves from well-bred clans
were forthright, honest Republicans
until slyly cheated and dispossessed,
twelve hours daily chained and pressed
for the last drop of effort, the final crop
of a squandered dignitas till they drop?
How many were honest, diligent men
till they borrowed from Cato our citizen?
Guardian of morals, in whose bordellos
you thump the daughters of these silly fellows.
More so — I hear our Censor collects
from in-house servants for casual sex.
Well, for the first time, it's you abused.
Think of Servilia, how she is used —
tumbled, whored with, a flagrant shame
to one of illustrious and public name.

59 B.C. *Virtus Millia Scutta*

The phrase is that of Marcus Porcius Cato, great-grandson of Cato the Censor, upholder of the Republican ideals of hard work, thrift and industry. Caesar irritated Cato by his profligate style of living, and then made him a deadly enemy by seducing his half-sister Servilia. Cato was a heavy drinker and something of a prig, but commanded respect for his uncompromising character. In 59 B.C. he talked the Senate out of awarding Caesar a triumph for his war in Spain.

TRIUMVIRATE

Quite set them by the ears — triumvirate —
it did: all those who'd deprecate
haughtily with precedent the provisions
of these hard military conditions.

Ours this settlement: the Senate's lands
excluding Campania in Pompey's hands —
thereby the thousands of old campaigners
made by Senate our retainers.

The which they saw, and why they fought
stubbornly saying that what they sought
was compromise only. . . But with Cato harried
and armed men behind, the bill was carried.

As for me, I then had Cisalpine Gaul
given with authority: five years in all.

Also Illyricum, Narbonese Gaul.

But also the power, the wherewithal
to build up armies from barbarian stock,
movements the Senate could not block
with talk of tradition or withheld pay.

No: me they will look to, me obey.

59 B.C. First Triumvirate

A crowded year. Caesar stood for Consul with Crassus's money, was elected and formed an open understanding in which Crassus obtained tax-farming concessions, Pompey got land for his veterans returning from the Mithridatic Wars, and Caesar was appointed to governorships of Illyricum, Cisalpine and Transalpine Gaul. The blocking tactics of the second Consul of the year, Bibulus, were ignored, and proposals carried through on the threat of violence. Caesar left the following year to start a late but brilliant military career.

THE NEW GENERAL

Idly they talk and take their pay
as birthright merely, as though they may
by being one of a mutinous throng
absorb its power and saunter along.
The same with orders, rations, all
they take of privation, of the world's call.
Winds that grow blustery over tall hills and fen
whisper again they are fighting men,
at length, after goading. The ranks again
are broken by unrest: where's one there's ten.
Some to be hauled off and made to pay
with floggings and hangings: the men obey.
But as for the officers — on hard stones the ring
is of hobnails but also such blustering!
Fat, empty mouthings! Popinjays
soft with furloughs and easy lays.
Therefore, Gnaeus, I have sent to Rome
those to be stationed nearer home.
Yours, this commission, I'd not have marred
by those not resolute or battle-hard.

58 B.C. Campaigns against the Helvetii

Caesar opened his governorship with campaigns against the Helvetii — warlike tribes who threatened the more settled Gauls by their mass migrations. Victories were secured by trickery, fortifications, battle and a firm stand against superior numbers. Caesar's customary bravado and singleness of purpose were now exhibited in the field of war — to the delight of troops who recognised a good commander, one who took risks but succeeded. The Helvetii were not enslaved, but sent back to Switzerland to act as a buffer against German tribes.

THE BELGIC CAMPAIGNS

We kept on at them till they broke,
followed them, hacking into stunted oak,
raided the thickets. Raked them. Most
with a wild cry thereafter gave up the ghost.
Blood on the bodies. Their golden bands
we tugged off at once. We felt our hands
warm with their breath, such as twisted away
to the bracken, brown water, the trampled clay.
Up steep slopes we went. Our whistling spears
punctured their torsos, when large with fears
like wild beasts they charged, were cornered, died:
hundreds lay heaped on each hillside.
A strange land, unkindly, and of a mould
uncongenial to us with its summer cold.
Even the campfires spread no hopes
in the hard feel of wind on the very slopes
where nightly we saw them; the flare of torches
that fashioned our vision still inwardly scorches:
so our remembering, as over grassed
slopes we picked slowly where thousands passed.

57 B.C. Belgic Campaigns

Caesar found himself at war with Ariovistus, king of the Seubi — a German tribe whose physique and prowess initially threw the Romans into panic. But Caesar's charismatic leadership restored confidence. Defeating the Germans in a major battle on the plain of Alsace, he drove them back across the Rhine. In the following year, 58 B.C., Caesar defeated a combined force of 40,000 Belgae on the Axona river, and then completed the conquest of Belgic Gaul with a victory over the Nervii and Aduatuci, selling 350,000 of them into slavery.

CALPURNIA

With patience I shall concede the race
and come home evenings to a kindly face,
to someone I can talk the whole day through:
in short, Calpurnia, a friend to you.
That's what I promise. It will not do
to pull the noses of the dwindling few
with position, influence, money late
come by to further this reprobate,
though, by his own efforts, he's still quite rich,
talked of and powerful, though as to which
purposes fortune will allow to fall
the die are not known, and least of all
to Caius, husband, who keeps his place
in the Senate, the army, the populace,
as a talker, fighter, long-headed man,
but still from the first a Republican.
Which you'll remember, dealing with Clodius,
I hope, as with Crassus — all who meet us
with talk of control, a more certain base?
Caesar is submission and knows his place.

59 B.C. Marries Calpurnia

Caesar returned to Rome and married Calpurnia, daughter of Piso, variously linked with Publius Clodius and other shady characters. It was again a political marriage, though with real affection on both sides. Caesar again became Consul, in agreement with Crassus and Pompey, the latter's marriage to Caesar's daughter Julia continuing to hold the two ambitious men together.

MEETING AT LUCCA

What can we do but patch again
dutifully staying the citizen?
A pact with Pompey, most devious of men
has to dump Crassus, but who knows when?
Strength lies in secrets which these meeting spin,
our Consul's words to be late and thin.
Pompey keeps Julia. What state that's in
Julia won't say, and I'm not to win
now Clodius or Gellius. The returning boom
of Cicero's eloquence will leave me room
for some such manoeuvre, although I think
that sometimes I totter, am on the brink
of losing the moment, but yet return
to money, influence. I cannot spurn
what is always, in the last addition,
munificence over the Gaul commission.
So I go on. For who stays still
inherits but weakness and increased ill will.
March up, march down: this is legionnaire's drill.
What beckons is fortune; what drives is will.

57 B.C. Meeting at Lucca

Crassus, Caesar and Pompey patched up their differences in secret conclave at Lucca in 57 B.C. Pompey came off best, obtaining a second Consulship and a five-year command in Spain, with the right to govern through legates (Caesar) while remaining at the centre of power in Italy. Pompey was still married to Caesar's daughter Julia, though repeatedly tempted to divorce her and ally himself with the Senate against Caesar. Crassus got richer but still hankered after military glory.

EPISTLE: MARK ANTONY TO CATULLUS

Have done, Catullus, it is the same
rank tomfoolery. She will not hear, blames
you, friends, for her mean ration
of praise and courtiers in the fashion
of traipsing about in these affections. Please
descant in private on vanities.
She knows, and we know, only that the step grows
heavier, the breasts flabbier, the years show.
Stop then, and walk, will you? With arms bare
from their stolas, the hips winkling and where
there is dancing before, like a taper bent,
the body will flare up, curled and spent.
Step forward or no? You are a fool,
my dear fellow, then — worse than that — stool-
pigeon, lickspittle, with turned-in feet
to be for her grist such paltry meat.
Above all, I beg you, put down those papers, I
will not hear, nor wish to. Try
as I might and resolve to, I shall not tire
of a Clodia abundant in her desire.

55 B.C. Dum Vivimus Vivamus

Clodia, the notorious sister of the equally notorious Publius Clodius, was famous for her looks and flagrant infidelities. Her liaison with Catullus brought poet and politician into close association. Catullus disapproved of Caesar's activities and lampooned him in scurrilous verses. Caesar invited the poet to dinner. Clodia had many lovers, and for a while took up with Caesar's lieutenant, the roistering Mark Antony.

INVASION OF BRITAIN

Tides at first higher, swell lifting, the wind
on the shingle foregathered and had them pinned.
Clean went the sails, cargo, rough gods drank
large at our fortune, and the great boats sank.
All the time tribes were filtering before
us in the thick oak forests, and more
and more imponderable that each hirsute torso
would ever be seen beneath us, or so
it seemed all that summer with Cassivellaunus
loosing like whirlwinds his wheels to warn us
of the far land's interior of blood-drenched pools
where the druid shrieks mischief and through it rules.
And also — miles more than the first guard sees
heavy with enemy the furze and trees —
comes the whinny, javelin: the sudden shout:
puncture, the dead lie in heaps about.
Wastage is what these lands intend,
with a Senate impatient. In the end
I took with me plunder, some tribute, but
naught of importance but a chapter shut.

54 B.C. Second Invasion of Britain

Caesar's first invasion of Britain was in 55 BC when a small expeditionary force landed west of Dover, were attacked by British war-chariots, and withdrew within a few weeks. The main invasion came a year later and was supported by a fleet of 800 ships. While Caesar advanced on the tribes briefly united under Cassivellaunus, the Roman fleet at anchor was caught in a sudden storm and half destroyed. Caesar returned to repair the damage and then resumed the invasion, finally taking a fortified town near St. Albans. But the British tribes avoided set battles and the exercise was inconclusive, adding to Caesar's titles but not Rome's coffers.

THE RAIN

The rain, and its endlessness on leaves
mouldering, on bracken. Our passage weaves
through quagmire and shadow — twin parent-hoods
of scouting and stopping in these shrouded woods.
Difficult and dangerous the foraging, earns
nothing for cooking and little burns
but lengthily smoulders, cackles, spits
a small thread of venom that puffs and flits
blue and widening through clearings that,
opening out northwards, go on to flat-
lands and marshlands that daylight finds
haggard as men in their several minds
on waking, to wonder, to brood on, with
nothing to look at, for which to live.
Chain mail grows rusty, the broken nights
are vivid with presences, half-veiled frights.
Still I must hold them: a trundling conundrum
towards their Fortuna which may not come.
The land set apart they shall call their own,
building a patrimony, stone by stone.

53 B.C. Gaul Risings

Caesar generally wintered in north Italy, where he could keep in touch with Roman politics. But the commanders he left behind in Gaul had a hard time keeping order. The Belgic tribes had submitted, but were not content under Roman administration. Frequently they resisted the tax demands, suffered reprisals, and then rose in further revolt. In Parthia, meanwhile, Caesar's former colleague and contender for power, Marcus Crassus, although a competent general, met with a major defeat at Carrhae. Crassus himself, son, and some 20,000 Roman soldiers were massacred. Of the triumvirate only Pompey and Caesar now remained.

VERCINGETORIX

Remember Avaricum: so many dead,
the thousands on thousands you armed and led
through countryside ravaged? Wide miles around
you were backwards hunted: dispatched, drowned.
It is not wise ever to make your war
on the soldierly Romans, who bring you law,
settlement, containment — counted men
to the extent you meet us at length again
in a country rich, without frontiers, where
prospects at evening are free as air
that soothes with a fragrance after labour,
with music to hear and to slowly savour.
Otherwise, what? Dark woods, still damp
morning and evening. And a green-turf camp,
where the smoke curls, the pigs mill, and every man
is a hirsute monster, a loathsome Pan
without pipings or music? No Bacchanal swirl,
no laughter, fervour, but a blear-eyed girl
who looks from the summer shimmer of blood
to the spreading acres of winter mud.

52 B.C. Avaricum

Caesar took Vercingetorix's camp at Avaricum (Bourges) after a long siege in a country stripped bare by scorched earth policies of the Gauls. By Caesar's reckoning, only some 800 of the 40,000 defenders escaped with their lives, many being pursued through the surrounding swamp. Vercingetorix continued the fight, however, moving his base to Alesia. In Rome matters had become more chaotic, with Pompey being appointed sole Consul to quell street fighting between rival gangs that claimed the life of Clodius and threatened others.

BATTLE IN ALESIA

You have seen, my friend, us well enough —
from all too close, the sort of stuff
even the least of us are made
of. And creating the fatherless is our trade.
Remember Alesia — how though staked
out in the open, and hourly raked
with your spears, stones, your arrows — who
but the conscripts drove on through
the earth and rock in a lengthening swathe
of rampart and fort, sharp palisade?
Beyond all fortune it's no mistake
that Rome is an empire that we make
earthy and enduring in theatred towns,
in villas, aqueducts, tilled surrounds —
life as we place it rests and stays
monumental as the days
that we have fought for, shall. So think,
Vercingetorix, as you sink
still the deeper with tribes in thrall:
resistance brings but further fall.

52 B.C. Caesar captures Vercingetorix

Vercingetorix was Caesar's greatest opponent among the Gaul tribes — charismatic, impassioned and prudent. Around the hilltop fortress of Alesia, Caesar was obliged to build thirty miles of fortifications to fend off attacks from the besieged Gauls and their would-be rescuers. After desperate fighting, which Caesar led personally, the Gauls surrendered. To avoid further bloodshed, Vercingetorix gave himself up, and was held over for execution at Caesar's triumph in Rome in 46 B.C.

COSSUTIA

So little, Cossutia, I have known
of sun-warmed evenings when the stone
is full of the quiet-mouldering smells
that gather like midges at country wells;
when long day's done for, rested, when
the snow-hung fields bloom green again,
maize ripens, grapes deepen, and all around
is the air now humming, a joyful sound.
So we should have lived, or not at all.
Why did you let your small hands fall?
Why not seize me, demand a cause?
But no, you turned silent, went indoors.
Why, my dearest, my own Cossutia,
was it likely I'd refuse you?
What was wanting in those warm brown eyes
that I'd continue with such lies?
Believe me Cossutia, I am a man
accustomed to sorrow, to hardship, can
remember its triumphs, its failures, cost
on tables I gamed at, the friendships lost.

50 B.C. In Memoriam Cossutia

There is no evidence that Caesar ever hankered after a quieter life, or that he regretted his marriage to Cornelia. She was the first of three wives — the others being Pompeia and Calpurnia. To all three he was much attached, although engaged continually in scandalous affairs. Nonetheless, there may have been times when this most active and hard-headed of men reflected on his life and its alternatives — particularly in 50 B.C. when he faced prosecution for exceeding orders in Gaul. His decision was to cross the Rubicon and launch the Civil War.

CIVIL WAR

Farewell to agreement for the die are cast:
he who was forward may now be last.
Behind me is faction: with a thousand heads
from Spain to Pontus the hydra spreads
its contagion, confusion. The legions fall
to order, to companies, so to Gaul
march with pipes playing: carouse, sing:
who knows in the morning what evenings bring?
Parades, skirmishing: an uncertain state,
even rapprochement as the two sides wait.
Ahenobarbus to whom I returned his pride
signally goes over to the other side.
Decimus Brutus will bring blockade:
anything more must be trench and blade.
Still they hold out, and supplies are lost:
even the veterans half count the cost.
Afrianus and Petreius capitulate
and lastly Massilia in its wearied state.
At length we go home, with little to cheer
us, raggedly ending a ragged year.

49 B.C. Outbreak of Civil War

Pompey had evacuated Italy for Greece, but Caesar did not follow immediately, lacking a fleet to transport his troops. Instead he marched through the south of France to Spain, where Decimus Brutus laid siege to the Pompeians in Massilia (Marseilles), while Caesar fended off attacks at Ilerde (Lerida). Caesar's troops suffered from the unfamiliar guerrilla tactics, were cut off by flooded rivers and lost their needed corn supplies. But eventually Pompey's lieutenants Afrianus and Petreius were starved into submission, and Massilia surrendered. On arriving in Rome, Caesar was elected Dictator for the first time. The following year he resigned the Dictatorship and followed Pompey to Greece.

BATTLE OF PHARSALUS

First the epidemic, Campania-wide,
before that Massilia where many died —
Sometimes I see them in this autumn tide
of a world overturned by the furies' ride.
Now it grows darker, and more abide
by campfires and thinking. Had you turned aside,
Pompeius Maximus, had you weighed the cost
to Rome and its allies, the kinsfolk lost,
none would have lifeblood enrich the loam,
none be brutally cut from home,
The trees would not echo their wind-heavy groans,
nor skulls be counted as the common stones.
By the Gods you know I did not choose this place
as any conclusion to our fearful race.
How could I, and why? My only request
was for homelands, for parley, for peace and rest.
Whatever the world is we now divide,
Gnaeus, between us, and the many beside,
in the thick of battle when their fierce arms collide,
the outcome is fortune's to decide.

48 B.C. Caesar defeats Pompey at Pharsalus.

Caesar sailed to Greece, besieged Pompey's camp, came close to disaster, retired to Thessaly, and met Pompey again at Pharsalus. Against the odds, he won — through luck, the careless optimism of the enemy, superior battle tactics, the better training of his veterans. The text derives from Labienus, who said before the battle, "Pompey, do not imagine that Caesar's army is the one which conquered Gaul and Germany. Only a tiny part of that army survives. A large part of it has perished, as was inevitable in all that fighting. Many more died in the autumn's epidemic in Italy; many more went home; many were left across the Adriatic. . . Besides, the best of them were killed in the two previous engagements in this Durazzo area."

CLEOPATRA

Never a voluptuous or a willing thing,
not what one wants of a casual fling:
the flotsam thrown up by the tides of war
is generally fortunate of a good deal more.
But one of the Ptolemies, the fabled kings,
in whose capillaries the purple rings
with that dark, that sensual, imperial blood
that ruled all Asia to the Indus flood.
An angular, accomplished, large-eyed sprat,
lithe with ambition, no doubt of that,
and courage, moreover, to have her sway
extend to the Caesar, with whom she lay.
Both falcons in short, and avaricious
of purpose and profit. And with the issues
of Rome, her dependence, her plebeian past,
fully conversant, entrenched to the last.
But above all to have, crop and command her
her in whose blood was the Alexander,
was for me to have all blessings penned:
from Venus to the Julii the gods descend.

48 B.C. Meeting with Cleopatra

Caesar entered Egypt to annex the country and its wealth. But in doing so he became embroiled in Alexandrian politics, with Ptolemy XIII and his twenty-one year old sister, Cleopatra. The latter smuggled herself into Caesar's quarters, became his mistress, and then queen of Egypt after she had murdered the half-brother left to rule jointly by the departing Romans. Cleopatra's meeting with Caesar is famous: she was brought in on a slave's shoulders, rolled in a carpet or carpet bag.

ALEXANDRIA

Indifferent to the harlotry and underdress
of languorous occasions I'd acquiesce
more to this sensual and practised balm
if bodies about me meant no harm.
But I am cautious and above all thrifty
of years and my dignitas — into fifty.
Yet watch in amazement, with not a scrap on,
how Nubians disport and how they wanton.
Thracians I remember: whose huge blue eyes
grew vapid and open with yeasty sighs,
who gave themselves up, with no half measure,
to every refinement of my pleasure.
Now that's beyond me. Although the east
makes its obeisance to man and beast,
gods are but passions and a man's abused
not by the body, but that unused.
Yet women are greedy. They clog the wheels
of a camp in its movement. The goddess deals
a good hand for drunkards if at dawn they're gone
with die cast and laughing over Rubicon.

47 B.C. Caesar in Alexandria

When Caesar was besieged in Alexandria it was the son of an old enemy, Mithridates VI, he had to send to, meanwhile fending off attacks on his small number of troops, his water supplies and shipping. Among these vexations he conducted his affair with Cleopatra — for a few weeks only, until help arrived, Ptolemy XIII was defeated and drowned, and Caesar marched off to meet Pharnaces at Zela.

WHAT DOES MAN WANT?

What does man want but to walk well by one,
to be adored in his manhood although the sun
lengthily turns, and as to bliss
laughs and says: now, enough of this.
Morning to moon-time I know your wiles;
I would have but your candid smiles.
Cleopatra, my falcon, my little queen,
bide with me, bear with me — who have been
my keepsake, my lodestone, the one who stays
all night by the poop deck until the rays
of the dawn light dazzle, and tired eyes swoon
to the warmth and quiet of afternoon.
Loose as limbs round me, unclothed and snaked,
now with all passion and fever slaked,
I lie here, reduced, and I watch the haze
harden on me in its lizard gaze.
To the extent I am of those half-breathed sighs,
even of watch fires in those eyes,
in pleasure and wanton of Egypt's ways
pharaoh I am for these few days.

47 B.C. Cleopatra as Queen

Mark Anthony lost an empire through dalliance with Cleopatra, but Caesar was a cooler and older man. Cleopatra's charm was legendary, though her portraits on coins and statues show a strong-featured woman with firm jaw and large nose. She was a Macedonian — gifted in languages, statecraft and intrigue, all abundantly employed after coming to the throne four years previously.

TARQUIN

By the Gods! I take what this people gives
much too kindly as the least one lives.
The small-town jealous who spill and brawl:
even their pigsties are shared and small.
What do they know of the vast meanwhile
where potentates eastwards retract their smile?
What can they grasp of lands out west
where tribesmen regather and do not rest?
What do they know of frost and its terrors?
How quickly mistake from the least of errors
spills to disaster? How blood alone
is of thousands of thousands in the splintered bone?
These have but nothings, unhooded fears,
the putrid residue of unlived years.
They call me dictator: Tarquin you are
to drag us under your trampling star!
The warm seas will take us; the triremed east
bows the more as with force increased
we leave this isthmus, this in-between,
for triumph and passage, my captains, queen!

47 B.C. Returns to Rome and then leaves for Africa

Caesar returned to Rome after his defeat of Pharnaces at Zela, was joined by Cleopatra, and was elected Dictator for the second time. His deputy, Mark Antony, had not governed well in his absence, and in his place Caesar appointed Lepidus, sharing the Consulship with him in 46 B.C. Before leaving to meet the Pompeians in north Africa, Caesar had to quell discontent in the Gaul legions and put more of his supporters in the Senate.

DEATH THROES OF THE REPUBLIC

Thapsus was fearful. Pompey's sons
rushed at us, roaring, and with dogged runs
tore at our standards, detachments, supplies:
a vast pool of horror when to our eyes
rose heavings of bodies and bodies downed,
heads lopped off, arms, and the slimy ground
churned with wet flesh, as stomachs with sound
high-pitched and stilling, that well-nigh drowned
our sturdiest soldiers. The blood as rain
fell now as furies hacked on in pain.
The human only anathema
to these now fighting with all hope far.
Then to the worst: Corduba's plain
bleached from the winter and the wind's stain:
battalions assembled like stiff stands of wheat
were broken, discoloured and in retreat.
I ordered them counted. There were thousands dead.
Thousands upon thousands of high names bled
of lifeblood in carnage of all Rome bore:
I beg of the gods that there be no more!

46-45 B.C. Last Battles

Caesar fought hard campaigns against Pompey's supporters in north Africa (Thapsus) and Spain (Munda). At Thapsus in 46 B.C. he defeated Labienus and Metellus Scipio, returning to Rome in July to become Dictator for ten years and start his calendar reforms. The following year he defeated Gnaeus Pompeius the Younger and Labienus at Munda — the most savage and dangerous battle in his career — and returned once more to Rome, where he continued with his reforms and was made Dictator for Life.

MASTER OF THE ROMAN WORLD

Such was my fortune, and in a fair field, I
(with the wind round me lifting, and in a sky
dowering contention) with my right hand
resolved on a greatness in this towering land.
Or whatever was richer, for the plenty of Gods
is both copious and various, even at odds
with the provinces won to the Pontic Lake,
now combed for their bounty, my regal sake.
Pah! you will say: not sinews but places
of venery, lechery and of painted faces.
Even in hard lands of tempest and rock
I put down a camp in more regal stock.
All that was thrown off, flowering from peaks
as wind plumes the lea-side, as words speak
of russet abundance over vales beneath
she would shed gladly from her trim brief.
Whatever was scandal? If a small
anointment of antimony can enthral
one who had matrons and slave girls a thousandfold,
must he opt now for silver who once had gold?

47 B.C. Fortuna Mea in Bello Campo

Caesar was now master of the Roman world. Pompey's old territories were his by right, and he had Cleopatra as queen and concubine. Lands in which he'd been humiliated (Bithynia) or victorious (Gaul, Italy and north Africa) were now part of the Roman Republic. All that remained if he was to emulate Alexander, the greatest military commander of the ancient world, was the conquest of Parthia and the kingdoms east. To that, and its enormous wealth, he now turned his thoughts.

PLEA TO THE GODS FOR PTOLEMAEUS

In despair of passion is thick blood sown —
encompassing, hungry, as desire has grown
darker than evening. On this our child,
Prince Ptolemaeus, as he is styled,
we ask of Fortuna a twofold lease:
on the east and the west a more lasting peace.
Let the great hopes of empire refresh his veins
in a tiered magnificence, that as he reigns
in high hopes, endeavours, nothing vain
on the throne, or in battle, let his glory stain
with purple the ages, the ancient claims
of the Ptolemies and Julii: illustrious names.
Ambition unsheathed is not resheathed
until of purpose we have bequeathed
to a smiling, smooth-featured, dark-browed boy
this edict to build and to not destroy
the Tribunes, the Senate, those famed creations.
Here to Rome's gods I offer oblations:
give sureness and strength in these small hands
right thinking, right action throughout our lands.

45 B.C. Caesarion

A son was reputedly born to Caesar and Cleopatra — Ptolemaeus, later called Caesarion. He was not mentioned in Caesar's will, and his identity is disputed, though a boy was certainly paraded as the Dictator's son. Cleopatra joined Caesar in Rome but left before Caesar's departure for north Africa and Spain. Thereafter, neither she nor her son played any part in Roman affairs until the arrival of Mark Antony fifteen years later. Caesarion was a name potent of mischief, however, and Octavian had the boy quietly put to death when he took control of Egypt in 30 B.C.

CICERO

Expected, isn't it, what I hold
signally dearest? I do not fold
my lips in displeasure at the Senate's sneers,
but ask, I beg you, to entrance their ears
eh, Cicero? Mentor? The robes you wore
are bulky for a soldier: I'm wanting your
reading, your wisdom, your practised heart:
believe me, and do not draw apart.
Rome as you saw it is not Rome to come.
All that's accomplished is a different sum.
Will you not see that, another course?
Who would not ride if given horse?
Look further. Consider. An empire waits
from forested Gaul to the eastern gates.
All is at increase, purpled with hills
fruiting with peace as the cumulus fills
with a down of contentment the evening fields,
the vineyards, the villas. By Roman shields
further than Egypt's old splendour of past
ours is the morning that will last.

45 B.C. Marcus Tullius Cicero

With Pompey gone, Cicero was the most celebrated representative of the old-world order, and Caesar tried to enlist his support. There was genuine affection between the two men, and kindred interests. But the honours awarded Caesar were too much for the old Republican, who retired from politics, writing continuously but taking no part in everyday affairs. Caesar continued with reforms and wrote his will, leaving much to Octavian who had impressed him on service in Spain.

ALL TOO WINDILY

All too windily they talk of what
is only exaction while vast fields rot.
Teeth of the dragon are the lives of men:
sorrow in sowing, and sown again.
What can I do? I have made no war
injurious to profit, nor aimed to draw
beyond our traditions, make client states
other than leap at their gelded fates.
Ask of the Senate! This stiff-necked lot
clings to its measures as these have got
less onerous, less risky, and still progress
further to bribery, bare duress.
Cannot they see how the very state
totters about them. They idly prate
of this to contend with, or that endower:
Where is the mandate for such power?
Cede kingship to Caesar — for I am known
assiduous as worthy of a throne.
Far overreaching any summer's lease
are my triumphs, my settlements, and peace.

45 B.C. Caesar and the Crown

Since returning to Rome in 45 B.C., Caesar had been involved in various projects: land reform, public gardens, draining of the surrounding marshes. He was soon to depart for Asia Minor and Parthia. Why not become king? Mark Antony made the proposal, but neither the people or the Senate would accept the proposition, and Caesar became openly contemptuous of his peers.

NO TITLES

No powers or entitlements can atone
for this always-to-be-predicted dull, grey drone
of a Senate in concourse. Although I groan
still they go on, all their words on loan
from us who have fought. How many knew
how thirst in the desert cuts tongues in two?
How frost on a cuirass rubs raw the breast?
How soundly on rocks tired bodies rest?
Soldiers are lives that extend Rome's sway,
not knowing the issue, the night from day
all very often as the whelm of battle
downs them and kills, the best as cattle.
Sometimes I still look to be young again,
carefree, vigorous, loved of men:
old limbs to grow green, their sap bring forth
a doubling of pleasure, from west to north.
But above all, I think, in the populous east
where hot blood has riot, has never ceased
in frank incantations on a jewelled bed
of empery of eyelash and lifted head.

44 B.C. Rome

Only one son of Pompey now remained, engaged in harmless piracy in the western Mediterranean. The real danger lay in Rome, where Caesar without bodyguards had daily to flatter, cajole and plead in the Senate, even though he'd packed it with his own supporters. With the people Caesar was popular. He instituted a police force, undertook public works, and resettled the oppressed poor in the countryside. But the Senate was grudging to the end, waiting for an opportunity to reassert its powers.

DARK SUN

Sun flames on the Tiber. On dark hills the day
smokes into tinder, and is drawn away
to meetings, resolutions. Affairs of state
are settled for the moment as legions wait
bridling impatience that the sun's great course
be countered, turned backward. Ten thousand horse
thunder to the Caucasus, and my applause
is the whole world held wondering under Caesar's laws.
Rome tonight lacks a single man
in his fields, under roof or the draughty span
of the aqueduct sleeping, or in marble courts,
who thinks himself stranger to my thoughts.
Why should I flatter these jumped-up farmers?
Where is there mischief to bind or harm us?
You, Populares, over years
I have courted, favoured and deepened fears
of street-fights, proscriptions. And you have hawked
nothing but envy at how she talked.
Vain as a peacock, said Cicero. Well, my friend,
let us be chary till we see our end.

44 B.C. Death of Caesar

Caesar was assassinated on 15th March 44 B.C. by a large group of Senators, including many he had rewarded and befriended. Cicero was murdered a year later in the great proscription ordered by Antony, Lepidus and Octavian. Cleopatra remained in Egypt, perhaps with plans to have joined Caesar at some stage in a campaign that was to have avenged the slaughter of Carrhae.

POSTSCRIPT

My patrimony: Caesar. The name I bear
is noble, accomplished and will outwear
all who come after, though each man dare
to build and still further in the high fields of air.
Asia spawns cities in their ceaseless sprawl
as Goths have their forests. And both, and all
were subject to legions. In the eagle's fall
like Jove I had mastery, a world in thrall.
If words out of togas may astound the days
even to the heart's most inward blaze,
they drift to amusement, to suspect praise,
as stoae are empty in the midday haze.
He who would rule must encircle with long
filaments to hold the unsteady throng
of poor and ambitious. Not by right or wrong,
but ambition, that only, shall he tame the strong.
Writing's as dust, but the cities rise
marbled and bustling to astonished eyes:
Let them look onward, and ever prize
the purple enfolded in Roman skies.

Postscript

Caius Octavius arrived in Brindisi within weeks of his great uncle's death, and by great political cunning succeeded in forming a second triumvirate with Antony and Lepidus. The conspirators were defeated at Philippi in 42 B.C., and Rome slowly turned against Antony, the clash culminating in the Battle of Actium in 31 B.C. and the suicides of Antony and Cleopatra a year later. As Byzantium, the Roman Empire lasted another fourteen centuries, the title Caesar continuing till modern times in Tsar, Kaiser and Shah.

INTERPRETATION

Historians will not need to be told that the Caesar of these poems is not one that can be properly documented. Events and incidents of his life are adhered to, but Caesar's inner motivations, notably the homosexuality or bisexuality, are ones we cannot possibly know. Homosexuality was not a crime in the Roman world — indeed was practised by many of Caesar's leisured contemporaries, as by the first emperors of Rome, from Augustus to Caligula — but is shown here as a force driving ambition. Caesar, I have supposed, feared the vulnerability that his homosexual nature exposed him to, and strove to protect himself by affairs with women, by a military career, by vindictiveness when threatened, and by supreme political office. This is not to deny the courage, intelligence or statesmanship that historians from Mommsen have applauded, only to root it in personal needs and difficulties.

I have written these poems in stress metre, regularly four beats to the line, intending a rather drumbeat measure that gradually drowns out the inner emotions as Caesar evolves into a public person. Rome was very different from the picture we have of it through Hollywood or a nineteenth century education — different despite all that we have gained from it: law, administration, language. Republican Rome lacked Greek refinement or Christian *caritas*, and its brutality was exacerbated by increasing civil wars.

GLOSSARY

Ahenobarbus: Domitius A. Pompey's lieutenant, killed at Pharsalus.

Alba: Legendary first city of Rome.

Aqueduct: Appian aqueduct: a poor quarter of Rome.

Anthony: Caesar's deputy in Gaul and Rome. Formed second triumvirate.

Bithynia: Independent kingdom in Turkey, north-east of Istanbul

Caesar: Cognomen. Family name within the Julii clan.

Caliga: Leather sandal worn by legionaries.

Campania: Province south of Rome.

Cassivellaunus: Celtic king: briefly united Britons against Romans invaders.

Catullus: Lyric poet. c 84 - 54 B.C.

Cicero: Marcus Tullius Cicero: writer, politician and orator.

Cisalpine Gaul: Northern Italy.

Clodia: Sister of Clodius, famous for her 'ox eyes' and sexual independence.

Clodius: Publius Clodius Pulcher: patrician profligate and rabble-rouser.

Consul: Highest grade of magistrate: two elected every year.

Cremona: City on Po in Cisalpine Gaul (northern Italy).

Decimus Brutus: Caesar's lieutenant, victor over Venetii.

Etruria: Province north of Rome, opposite Corsica.

Fortuna: Goddess of fortune. Caesar's guiding star.

Further Spain: Roman province of south-west Spain.

Gades: Spanish city: present-day Cadiz.

Caius, Gnaeus, etc: Praenomen or first name.

Gaul the Nearer: Cisalpine Gaul, south of the Alps.

Gellius: Roman politician.

Illyricum: Yugoslavia.

Julius: Nomen of Caius Julius Caesar: clan of the Julii.

Labienus: Caesar's man in Gaul: alienated by favours shown Anthony.

Lepidus: M. Aemilius Lepidus. Caesar's master of horse: formed second triumvirate.

Magnus: Great: the cognomen given Marcus Pompeius.

Narbonese Gaul: Southern France.

Paphlagonia: Eastern Turkey

Parthians: Scythian tribes who conquered old Persian Empire.

Patvium: City in Cisalpine Gaul (northern Italy).

Pharnaces: Son of Mithridates VI: reasserted independence.

Pilum: Heavy javelin, used by Romans in Gallic wars.

Proconsul: Senior magistrate, below Consul.

Propraetor: Governor of provinces, two steps down from Consul.

Ptolemy: Macedonian dynasty of Egypt, founded by Alexander's general.

Quaestor: Lowest grade of magistrate: managed finances.

Scipio: Publius Cornelius Scipio: victorious general of Second Punic War.

Tarquin: Last king of Rome: made kingship obnoxious.

Tyrian: Purple. Senators wore a purple stripe to their toga.

Toga: Public dress, made of woollen material 3m in diameter.

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