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'a glittering word-hoard'

*Kind critic, master of change and
exchange, how goes it in the old country?
Still corresponding with Mercurialis?
Do you walk the nether edge and plot
your next incursion, courteous gadfly
on the body politic? The generous
Muses poured into your cradle
a glittering word-hoard, and the wit
to decode it. Thalia, the trickster,
flashed her slant smile and whispered
'Speak what you feel, health
and fame will follow.' Treat each dawn
as earth's last morning, every
hour a gift. And whenever you need
to laugh, come visit. You'll find
a sleek, contented pig on easy street.*

Hardly bigger than a sonnet, at sixteen lines, this tender little letter combines sympathy for a sensitive friend with a teasing humour that makes it the most spontaneous of all the epistles. Its famous last line, offering a chance to laugh 'with a pig from Epicurus' herd,' may suggest allegiance to that philosophy in the circle of Maecenas. This version, a close imitation of the original, is for Alan Halsey (with many Five Seasons titles to his name) who has made me laugh for thirty-five years, and designed a sly runic cover for one of my collections. Some debts cannot be repaid.

One great surprise of these epistles: they contain no mention of a major poet from the Maecenas circle. Not Vergil or Propertius, nor Cornelius Gallus, who was addressed affectionately by Vergil in his sixth and tenth eclogues and was regarded in his time as the first of the great elegiac love poets. In this fourth epistle, however, Horace addresses one of the world's great poets, Albius Tibullus, who belonged to the circle of Messalla Corvinus. This circle also included Sulpicia, the only Roman female poet whose work survives, her apparent brother Lygdamus, and the young Ovid. The two circles were close: Messalla knew Horace in Athens, served with him under Brutus at Philippi, and was grandfather to the second epistle's Lollius. He shares wine with Horace in Ode 3 of Book I.