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Wrestling with the Minotaur of Time: The Cyrenaic's Response

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To be born is to die. That is the paradox of life. As we grow we die, and so for Seneca, life is nothing but a journey to death.

A candle has life only when it is burning. As it burns it dies.

Animate objects suffer the same destiny. But unlike the plants and the beasts, human beings suffer not only the same destiny but also the thought of that destiny, its inevitability, its horror, its mystery. In us that destiny is felt and apprehended more poignantly precisely because we are humans with a consciousness of death, which is time closing in on us, choking us, depriving us of air. God, if there is one, has programmed us to last but a few years. What is the Biblical three score years and ten compared to the billions of years of the life of the cosmos? Seventy is short indeed.

Some 2, 500 years ago the pre-Socratic philosopher, Heraclitus, mourned the sad condition of mankind in a sweeping generalization: *Everything is in a state of flux.* There is an implied contradiction in that statement because, if that were so, the logical consequence would be to say: *Everything is not in a state of flux.* So the modernists added a parenthetical qualification, thus: *Everything is in a state of flux (except this statement).*

Bothersome as this statement is, it is nevertheless accurate. Look around you. Nature is in a state of constant, continuous change. The seed rots and then grows into a new plant. You see it grow bigger and taller, occupying a wider space. The branches multiply and the leaves proliferate, though not as fast as the

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farmer would wish. The changing seasons, the rhythmic alternation of sun and rain, of day and night, make the green leaves turn yellow, then brown, and soon they fall back to earth from which for a moment they seemed to have departed. But not without replacement. Fresh green leaves grow and soon the tree is taller than the house. Sooner than you expect, the tree bears flowers, and from the flowers come the fruit. The seeds are in the fruit, a thousand times more than the one seed that rotted in the ground some years ago.

This regeneration in the world of nature has a lot to teach us as Philip Larkin shows us in his excellent poem "Trees," which is a more mature alternative to Joyce Kilmer's illogical poem. But what makes Heraclitus' observation painful and tragic (because it inspires pity and fear) is when it is applied to mankind. Because we are not trees. We are worse than trees. We have a consciousness that tells us that although regeneration also occurs in mankind, we as individuals are not going to come back. We may be going somewhere, as some religions tell us, but we are definitely not coming back to planet earth, unless the Buddhists are correct about their idea of reincarnation and transmigration of souls. But even that, we may reincarnate with a different consciousness as death erases memories of previous lives. At any rate, we have only one life to live at a time.

More poetic, but no less philosophical, is another statement by Heraclitus: *You can not step on the same river twice.* Again, the positivistic hair-splitters will argue that that is not accurate. One can cross the few centimeters of Sucabon River, from one bank to the other, and Sucabon will not transform into Seine or Danube. The point of Heraclitus is that the water you step on the second time is no longer the same water as you have stepped on the first time. The name of the river does not change, only the water of that river.

The human implication of Heraclitus' idea inspires pity and fear. And all through the ages people have responded to it in different ways. What to do in the face of the inevitable that nothing lasts? Most people have turned to religion because it promises a life hereafter where the things that we know here on earth will also be found. Those who have less faith try to find the solution right here, in the here and now. After all, they argue, there is no certainty that the promise of religion is true, or even valid.

There are those who find solace in the idea of eternal recurrence so well expressed by Homer in the *Iliad:*

> As the generation of leaves, so is that of humanity. The wind scatters the leaves on the ground, but the live timber burgeons with

> leaves again in the season of spring returning. So one generation of men will grow while another dies.

In a similar vein Seneca expressed the same idea when he wrote:

> All things are connected in a sort of circle; they flee and they are pursued. Night is close at the heels of day, day at the heels of night; summer ends in autumn, winter rushes after autumn, and winter systems into spring; all nature in this way passes, only to return.

It is very easy to transfer this self-renewing attribute of the seasons to men/women—men/women like the seasons being part of nature. In fact certain forms of religious beliefs such as Buddhism believe in reincarnation and the karmic cycle. But I think it is a mistake to confuse the cyclical movement of nature and the seasons with permanence, much less with the permanence of one human life. A tree may renew its leaves, bear fruit and the seeds of the decayed fruit may bear other trees after its own kind. The east may repeat its sunrise, the west its sunset; and man/woman may beget children and then die, and his/her children will beget other children and so on, *ad infinitum*. But this repetition does not convince me that the man who has begotten me, and who is now dead, will one day, perhaps in a hundred years or a millenium, become my father again, and that I his fifth child will be the same fifth child among the ten children that he had sired in this life. In short, recurrence, even in nature, does not mean permanence.

Nor does the endless repetition of night and day console me in the least. The idea of recurrence is true to man/woman only as this being is viewed as a species, but it is not true once man/woman is viewed as an individual. The same can be said of trees, flowers and beasts when they are viewed as individuals and not as species. Homer is explicit enough in saying "humanity" and "generation of men," but not one man/woman, and Seneca talks of impersonal, inanimate things like the day and night, and the seasons. For it is beyond doubt that I, as a man, as Anthony Tan, will not happen again (which is a pity) after I die. I am limited by time. My nature is not permanence but transience. My physical body decays, and it will not be renewed, and it is not renewable, except in a manner of speaking as when I have children. With the decay of my body, my spirit too comes to an end. Yes, it is common and comforting to believe and say that my ideas may live and be meaningful to others long after my body has decayed, but what will these ideas

mean to me after I am dead? Or will it do my dead body any good if the living are making use of my ideas? Every day we discuss Aristotle's ideas (and in the present tense) on very many subjects, but there has never been a moment since the Renaissance when it was known that as a result of all our learned and not-so learned discussions, Aristotle has been less dead than he was in 322 B.C. Therefore, although it is comforting to believe in eternal recurrence and yearn for permanence by relating ourselves to eternal forms of life, the naked truth is that we all die.

To understand Cyrenaicism, it is necessary to go back to its philosophical groundwork which is found in the Heraclitean idea of flux.

The seeming passiveness or durability of things is an attribute that in fact is not found in them. For beneath this passiveness the dynamics of change are at work, continuously at work. It was for this reason that Heraclitus held the primacy of fire over the other three elements as the principle of all beings.

The Heraclitean doctrine that the world is but a passing shadow has two possible and opposite consequences. On one hand, it can lead to nihilism, the denial of all real existence, the philosophy of the despair of knowledge, since according to this doctrine there could be no fixed knowledge of things as things cannot in themselves be known. On the other hand, the doctrine can lead to the idea that the only certainty is the momentary and immediate impressions of the individual who is the measure of all things; and because of this, the individual is induced to every kind of activity and to thirst after experience.

Aristippus of Cyrene, the founder of the school of philosophy called Cyrenaicism, takes up the second consequence in developing his own philosophy of life. He brings down to mundane concerns the highly visionary ideas of Heraclitus. He provides a "practical, worldly wisdom," and translates "the abstract thought of the master into terms...of sentiments."

The philosophical groundwork of Aristippus may be briefly stated as follows: If we cannot know things as they are in themselves, there is at least one thing we can be sure of, because it does not need any proof, and that is our feeling. Of course, we cannot be sure that our feeling corresponds to things we perceive, for our senses may distort them. After all, our senses only represent these things to us. Even "common experience" cannot be "a satisfactory basis of certainty" because "we cannot really know the feelings of other people, or how far they would indicate the same modifications," even if they use the same terms as we do. The only reassuring thing for man/woman is to fall back on his/her own impressions, because his/her senses certainly do not deceive him about himself, and he can never deceive himself/herself.

A corollary to this problem is that there is no true time except the present moment because for the individual the time past has ceased to exist and the time future may never come. To reduce this into a practical, ethical position, what is man/woman to do when he/she is faced with the problem that his/her days are but shadows? The doctrine of Cyrenaicism provides the answer. A life of happiness is dependent on pleasure, and the particular sensation of pleasure of the moment is regarded as the end of action, the only good desirable for its own sake, and the criterion of right and wrong. (The epistemological basis of this doctrine is that perception is fallible and it restricts knowledge to sensations.) Pleasure is a positive sensation, not a mere absence of pain. Physical pleasures are better than mental ones.

In the works of Walter Pater the ideas of Aristippus are further modified. Pater calls his brand of Cyrenaicism as the New Cyrenaicism. Following the ethical ramification of Heraclitus' doctrine of perpetual motion and Aristippus' modification of that doctrine in terms of worldly wisdom, Pater summarizes the position of New Cyrenaicism as it is conceived by Marius, the protagonist of Pater's novel *Marius the Epicurean*. In Chapter IX of the novel, we find the following passages:

> If he could but count upon the present, if a life brief at best could not certainly be shown to lead to anything beyond itself, if men's highest curiosity was indeed so persistently baffled—then...he would at least fill up the measure of that present with vivid sensations, and those intellectual apprehensions, which, in strength and directness their immediately realized values at the bar of actual experience, are most like sensations.
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> Conceded that what is secure in our existence is but the sharp apex of the present moment between two hypothetical eternities, and all that is real in our experience but a series of fleeting impressions...that we are never to get beyond the walls of this closely shut cell of our own subjective personality; if the ideas we are sometimes impelled to form of an outer world, and even of minds a kin to our own, are, it may be, but a daydream, and the thought of a world beyond, a daydream probably thinner still, then, he, at least, in whom these fleeting impressions—faces, voices, material sunshine—were very real and imperious, might

> well set himself to the consideration, how much actual moments as they passed might be made to yield him their utmost, by the most dexterous training of his capacities....In the actual dimness of ways from means to ends—ends though in themselves excellent, yet for the most part distant, and for him, certainly, below the visible horizon—he would at all events be sure that the means...should have something of finality or perfection about them, and themselves partake, in a measure, of that more excellent nature of ends—that the means should justify the end.

There is something visionary or mystical in such a view of life, because our immediate sensations and the succession of moments may sometimes prevent us from apprehending or arresting the most perfect forms of life in their most intense moments. It is as though this view of life demanded that in every moment all our nerve-ends be constantly subjected to pleasurable sensations, and like a super-sensitive seismograph we must catch the least tremor of pleasure.

The weakness of this view is that it is not physically, or even psychically, possible for man/woman to live in such a state of perpetual and intense excitation. Because of continuous subjection to intense pleasures, the senses will become jaded and therefore impervious to further excitement. Think of Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony* played 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, for a lifetime of three score years and ten! Such harmony at this level of intensity and frequency can kill by satiety. We have to listen to the cacophonous croaking of the frogs to appreciate the harmony of music. However, the more proper antidote to satiety is not the absence of beauty or the presence of ugliness, since the sense can glorify all ugliness into beauty. Rather, the antidote to satiety is the requirement that the body and the mind know moments of calmness so that they can better apprehend the pleasurable moments when they come.

Such a view of life, because it takes pleasure as the sole end of life, is hedonistic. How does Pater answer this objection? He dismisses the charge of hedonism as a form of begging the question. Nevertheless, he is forced to make a proper distinction as to the exact meaning of New Cyrenaicism. "Not pleasure," he says

> But fullness of life, and 'insight' as conducting to that fullness—energy, choice, and variety of experience—including noble pain and sorrow even,--loves...sincere and strenuous forms of moral

> life...whatever form of human life, in short, [that] was impassioned and ideal...

At the conclusion of his famous work *The Renaissance,* Pater quotes the French Romantic novelist Victor Hugo: we are all condemned, *we are under sentence of death but with a sort of indefinite reprieve.* What are we supposed to do during the interval?

> Some spend this interval in listlessness, some in high passions, the wisest, at least among 'the children of the world,' in art and song. For our chance lies in expanding that interval, in getting as many pulsations as possible in a given time. Great passions may give us this quickened sense of life, ecstasy and sorrow of love, the various forms of enthusiastic activity, disinterested or otherwise, which come to many of us. Only be sure it is passion—that it does yield you this fruit of quickened multiplied consciousness. Of this wisdom, the poetic passion, the desire of beauty, the love of art for art's sake, has most, for art comes to you, proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments' sake.

Pater found his point of departure in the awareness of the brevity of life, and he offered a view of life, a moral attitude, that is in harmony with that awareness. In his time this attitude was considered un-Victorian and decadent. As we enter the 21st century we are more aware of the changing timescape and the fragility and fortuitous character of our world. We are less morally stringent. There is in his view of life, as in Watteau's "A Pilgrimage To Cythera" and in Stevens' "Sunday Morning," a certain tragic pathos at the passing of a lovely world. There is no doubt, in the above quoted passages, a passion and seriousness for physical beauty not unlike the saint's consecration to the purity of the soul. On a higher plane, the saint and the Cyrenaic are one of a kind. One sanctifies the body through the perfection of the soul; the other sanctifies the soul through the perfection of the body.

Life is brief and its moments are like shadows. We cannot know the world outside of ourselves, nor can we be certain of the world beyond. The past has ceased to exist, the future is not yet here and it may never come. We are certain only of the present moment, which, however, is also swiftly passing away. We are

also certain of our fleeting impressions of what we feel, touch, taste, hear and see. Since we cannot know with certainty what is outside of ourselves, since things pass as swiftly as our modes of knowing them, each individual must be to himself the measure of all things, and he must rely on the certainty of his impressions. And, finally, since life is moving irrevocably toward its end, it becomes necessary for each of us to fill our passing moments, the here and now, with pleasurable sensations.

This "Gather Ye Rosebuds" philosophy is the only means of cheating time and of prolonging the interval between two poles of nothingness. The *carpe diem* poets like Omar Khayyam, Robert Herrick and Andrew Marvell have recognized its wisdom and celebrated it in art and song. They are what Pater calls "the children of the world," and they are also the wisest because they know how to expand that short interval by filling it with "as many pulsations as possible." It is in "great passions" that they achieve the "fruit of quickened, multiplied consciousness," which enables them to transcend the limitation of time and space. One of these passions is the artistic passion, the love of beauty, the love of art for its own sake. It is the wisest of passions because art comes to you to offer you the "highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments' sake."

Let us imagine, with some help from Schopenhauer, that life is a pendulum. From one hypothetical eternity (the time before birth), it is swinging forward to another hypothetical eternity (the time after death),-and we are powerless to stop it. In Pater's view of life and art, we have nothing less than the urgent and impassioned proposal that we hold that pendulum in the center, that we suspend, for as long as we can, its forward swing in the here and now by contemplating beauty and art. If we could do this, we should attain an almost mystical condition of past and future intersecting in a timeless moment; in short, of time standing still. This is the mystical quality of artistic transcendence, which should satisfy Kirilov's aspiration for "eternity in this world."

II

The following poems were written from a specifically Cyrenaic, or New Cyrenaic, viewpoint. Though the subject matters differ, they do not differ widely or significantly. But even when they do, there is still the common substratum that ties the theme together, the viewpoint adopted by the speaker. The employment of this viewpoint, however, is not so much for the sake of content in order to promote a certain philosophical agenda as much as a literary device in order to ac-

centuate the tone of each poem, to sharpen the emotion, to increase the degree of lachrymosity to the breaking point but stopping short on the border of sentimentality, and, finally, to enhance the degree and enlarge the area of tension between the passing world and the Cyrenaic's desire to hold on to what is beautiful and valuable in that passing world.

In short, a romantic quest for permanence is tinged with a realist's awareness of the futility of it all. This theme is repeated in several poems, particularly in "Morning of a Cyrenaic" where the speaker is aware of the varied forms of light, color, smell and sound. He concludes the poem with these words:

One cannot have enough of color and pungency
In a fleeting world of moments and moments,
On days like storm clouds in typhoon season.
Beyond the otic canals or neural circuitry,
How weld to the spirit the temporal delight
Of a minuet, toccata or symphony?

In a similar vein the speaker in "Tropical Noon of a Cyrenaic" imagines that the Cyrenaic, though he suffers from the "pyre" of tropical noon, would want to plead with the sun not to rush toward its appointed place. (There is a bit of Herrick and Marvell's sun here and its race toward the west.) Though the time of the poem is limited to one day, the subtext is really time itself as suggested by the lines:

With half a day gone, like half a lifetime,
You would, if you could, rivet it to mid-sky.
Plead with it not to rush toward ruin and sundown.

In a "Cyrenaic's Twilight" the speaker pleads with somebody not to hasten to turn on the lights because there is still a bit of natural light left in the firmament. There is a Cebuano word for this: *daguinot*. The nearest English idiom I can think of is "lemon squeeze." The speaker is trying, metaphorically, of course, to "lemon squeeze" the last lights out of the dying sky before the artificial lights are turned on. Every moment of natural light is precious because darkness is always threatening to swallow it.

"A Cyrenaic's Lament" is also a "twilight" poem and related to the end of the day. Even the images are almost identical. The difference, however, is the

inclusion of the name of Aristippus. The speaker, observing the time of the day, addresses the last line to his master-teacher, the founder of the school of thought to which he subscribes. He wonders how Aristippus himself would react if he were observing the same images of tropical twilight—the color and pageantry which includes the celestial presence of the Evening Star coming out precociously, and the song of a lone blackbird. Given the particular viewpoint of a Cyrenaic, wouldn't Aristippus respond to this scene with "soul-tears" and "heart-shudders" the way the speaker does? Wouldn't Aristippus too mourn the passage of time, the passage of the beautiful manifestations of nature?

Another "twilight" poem is "Pentameters, Going on 50." The imagery is a recapitulation of the imagery in two previous poems. This time the Cyrenaic speaker becomes more acutely aware of how much time is left. The shadows, to use a cliché, are lengthening. The 20-year old speaker in A.E. Housman's "Loveliest of Trees" seizes the day because he thinks that to enjoy the beauty of springtime fifty years are "little room." How much less are twenty years for the speaker of this poem! The waxing moon, the archetypal symbol of transience, is perceived as a temporary progression which for the moment gladdens him, but almost immediately regret sets in because he is not certain whether he would be there to continue to enjoy it.

Yet still another "twilight" poem is "Sunset View from a House in Jasaan." Here the attempt is not to romantically lament the end of the day but to immerse oneself in the changing images and sounds as evening sets in. As the images and sounds associated with daylight begin to fade, they are slowly being replaced by images and sounds associated with evening. The Cyrenaic must sit still to welcome the evening (what else does he have given his mind set?), open up his senses to its contrasting sounds. The "syllables of small waves" on the shingle have not changed though now they also bring in the "melancholy of tidal retreat." The ephemeral, and ethereal, "cry of the kingfisher" becomes for the Cyrenaic observer the haunting sound of impermanence.

"Old Man and a Pup" is an attempt to dramatize the difference between the human perception of time and the lack of it among the brutes. They have something in common in that like the pleasure-seeking Cyrenaic, the puppy is also interested in its own bodily pleasure. The observer is a forgiving old man. He understands the puppy's blindness to time passing, to its own mortality. But he is keenly feeling the knife-stabs of time, symbolized in "spilling droplets/Of sunlight on the summer grass."

The penultimate poem "A Cynic's New Millenium, 1999" takes off from

where Thomas Hardy left in his end-of-the-century masterpiece "The Darkling Thrush," which was written on December 31, 1900. In it Hardy described a bleak English wintry landscape in funereal imagery but ended it with the song of a thrush which the speaker interpreted as, perhaps, a song of hope, thus, giving credence to his statement that he was not a pessimist but only a meliorist. "A Cynic's New Millenium, 1999" brings to a logical conclusion the Cyrenaic's philosophical stance. There is nothing to look forward to in terms of hope in the new millenium. A new millenium is just a continuation of old time. By calling time new, mankind hopes for a change. But the change is change for the worse: instead of a song that the Cynic desires from the birds, he gets only their droppings, as if nature were saying "Shit to your New Year."

It is fitting that the collection ends with "Crossing the River." The poem is a re-working of the journey-motif that is central to mythology dealing with the after-life. Though the imagery in this particular poem is basically Greek, the journey-motif is also Egyptian and even Filipino, if we go by the two figures on the lid of the Manunggol burial jar. The poem attempts to dramatize that final moment. It tries to come to grips with its terror and mystery. It tries to portray Death as a greedy boatman whose love of silver is all too human. Above all, it tries to capture the essential loneliness of that journey:

> There was no one to say goodbye to.
> No friends. No kinsmen. No lovers.
> The gurgle in the wake took the place of words.

In contrast to the noise of a vigil/wake and the lamentations during a funeral, there was only silence between the boatman and his passenger. Only the gurgle of the river accompanied his journey. And the people who had gone ahead, on the other bank of the river of time/death, they were strangers.

A Cyrenaic's Aubade

Mauve is the sky before the sun rises
From the nether part of the hemisphere.
Hieratic quietness reigns over the earth
Before birds descend in twittering drove.
Who sees the stars fade into yesterday?
Imperial gold and yellow the street lamps burn.
The houses sleep, tenant-less at this hour,
(The hour the Tent-maker himself would rise.)
What you feel, behold and dream becomes yours:
Grass under bare feet, wind on naked skin.
Let through the iron gate the mountain breeze,
Let it make soothing music with the chimes.
Greet the relentless dawn the way birds do:
With zestful wings and unpremeditated song.

Morning of a Cyrenaic

After a long night of intermittent rains,
A windless morning under a turquoise sky.
A celebration of warblers fills the air.
A stream of sunlight on a crystal vase,
On a crown of red and yellow gladioli,
On place mats, native-woven and arabesque.
Whiff of steaming coffee, brown wheat bread
Toasted to complement the orange marmalade:
One cannot have enough of color and pungency
In a slippery world of moments and moments,
On days like storm clouds in typhoon season.
Beyond the otic canals or neural circuitry,
How weld to the spirit the temporal delight
Of a minuet, toccata or symphony?

Tropical Noon of a Cyrenaic

Their indignant shrill the siren of noon
As if in fear the pyromaniac sun
Would singe their gossamer wings,
The cicadas must be crawling beneath
The scanty shade of towering mahogany.
The sparrows too have suspended their festive
Mood to seek the sanctuary of eaves.
Randomly descending, sparing nothing, the sun
Is sucking the stones dry, setting them afire,
Causing the immemorial moss to flake off
The crannies of the cobwebbed walls.
The mind too spins in this pyre, desiring rain.
Yet you plead with the sun to tarry.
With half a day gone, like half a lifetime,
You would, if you could, rivet it to mid-sky.
Plead with it not to rush toward ruin and sundown.

A Cyrenaic's Lament

A cool spot to snooze away the afternoon,
As a fat, brown cat has discovered,
Is the tin roof of a dirty kitchen
Shaded by the lush blades of sugar cane.
High above, the cotton-balls of clouds
Partake of the saffron color of sunset.
Solitary on the summit of an Indian tree,
A black bird repeats its song of six notes.
Rising before dusk, the Evening Star asserts
Its bold, lonely, celestial precocity.
I behold this scene with you on my mind,
Aristippus, and wonder what tragic lament,
Were you here, would pass through your soul
To witness the spectacle of a tropical sunset,
Transient as the dusk-song of the black bird;
Whether you would shed soul-tears at the haste
A summer twilight rushes toward darkness;
Whether a heart-shudder would overwhelm you
As the light breeze ushers in the night.

A Cyrenaic's Twilight

A quarter of the sky is tangerine,
Darkening toward vermilion near the rim.
The brown sparrows have flown to roost
On the summit of the star-apple tree.
The mother cow is mooing to her calf,
Lost somewhere in the next pasture.
The crickets announce the end of day.
Croaking from garden walls, the frogs agree.
The angelus bells have long been silent.
Mid-sky the half-moon is hazy in the solstice.
Darkness comes early when the sun is farthest.
But no, don't turn on the lights yet.
Look, the belated birds are still in the air.
Let the firmament finish its last lights.
Don't hasten the twilight to end the day.

A Cyrenaic on Bantayan Island, Cebu

Over the isle's supernal darkness,
Vast stretches of galactic dusts.
The stars, like holes of a cosmic sieve,
Brighten and multiply as the night deepens,
Each emanation a dent on the face of time.
We won't be frightened by their silence, Pascal.
We'll drop our careworn spirits on Cassiopeia's
Chair, and load our sorrows on the wagon
And drive it beyond the points of La Grange.
Let the archer shoot into the void
Of another galaxy, drawing his arrows
From a quiver of earthly woes.
The wish we must make, when the meteors
Shoot down like celestial fireworks,
Is lightness of being: to be borne
Evermore on the wave of laughter,
On the spindrift of intimacy.
Not steadfast as stars that were compasses
To bygone sailors, the ground of existence
Is as the sands on this beach of Santa Fe.

A Cyrenaic on Crow Island

Palisade of seven heads of rocks,
As though impaled there by some benign god,
Wards off the fierce waves of the open sea.
In the cove the water is waist-deep, light green,
The seabed smooth where no anemones grow.
One horn of the cove is a coral cliff
Whose rock face is serrated by the surfs'
Ceaseless flinging of flotsam to higher ground.
They leave a grating, sucking sound,
Which is the island's exhalation.
A few straggling shrubs crown the cliff.
The crows lived once on the swamp of mangroves.
No black wings now darken the sun-drenched sky,
Nor one baleful cry rends the morning stillness.

Pentameters, Going on 50

In still weather, precocious as always,
The new moon is a thin slice of silver.
In mid-March sky the high, tangerine clouds
Are slowly taking on the twilight hues:
Shades of gray, indigo, purple, cobalt.
Below, and closer home, a riot of green,
A mat of fresh-fallen leaves on the lawn.
Urgent is the call of the black songbird:
Melodies at dusk, memories of dawn.
In the passing wind a certain sharpness.
Tomorrow the new moon will grow large; it
Will be larger still in the days to come.
I envy other eyes that will watch it,
For tomorrow who knows where I would be.

Sunset View from a House in Jasaan

(for Danny and Marlies)

The lure of porch and an easy chair,
Primeval syllables of small waves.
On the shingle the pebbles' gray intensity.
Out in the west the last streaks of tangerine
Are pinioned between the slate of the open sea
And the masses of cobalt, insinuating rain.
Will you tarry a little longer?
Will you watch the gathering indigo of twilight
Obliterate the last bright hues of the day?
But watch too how the boats of the fishermen
With their tiny, silver points of gaslight
Restore the color on the horizon.
Sit back in the easy chair
In the complacency of the breezy porch.
Listen again to the syllables of small waves.
Take in too all the melancholy of tidal retreat
And the far-away cry of the kingfisher.

Old Man and a Pup

He forgives its blindness to the summer
Wind on mahogany top where fresh leaves
Hesitate between yellow and green,
To all the green stages of things,
Grass, leaves, buds and fruit.
No, it merely closes its eyes the better
To feel the weight and pleasure
Of his toes rubbing its tummy.
It doesn't notice, nor does it care
If it does, how the mango leaf buds
Are like the color of its eyes,
How the yellow and brown leaves
Hang to desiccated twigs.
They too were once green,
He would like to tell the pup.
So were the red peppers and all things
That ripen, or become pungent, in summer.
A gust of wind blows away a leaf.
The pup jumps and races to catch it.
It crackles between its playful jaws,
A curious plaything from above,
Nothing symbolic, just dry, tired leaf
Whose turn it was to fall.
The pup is so caught up in it
It doesn't notice the shrinking shadow
Of the eaves as the sun races toward noon,
Nor the wind's distraction,
Nor, certainly, time spilling droplets
Of sunlight on the summer grass.

A Cynic's New Millennium, 1999

During a lull between typhoon rains
Nine white-breasted birds sat on a wire
Under the canopy of low, gray clouds.
On sodden ground the trees and shrubs
Wore the vestigial gloom of late December.
I thought of Hardy and his frail, gaunt thrush
And wished the birds would repeat to me
The thrush's song of hope, celestial solace
They would deign to pour on world-weary souls.
I waited for their song. None of them sang,
Engrossed they were with primping their feathers.
If nine presaged good luck, thought I,
It would be a prosperous year, or decade.
"Happy New Year!" I hailed them cheerily.
Six scampered away, startled, as I was myself,
By the zing and suddenness of my salutation.
Three tarried behind and looked around,
Twitched their tails in unison,
Dropped something white and watery
On my bare head and whisked into the dark.

Crossing the River

Came upon a river shrouded in mist.
Too early for bird call, or wing beat,
Too early even for wind.
A giant conch shell on a beaded string
Hung on the branch of a leafless tree.
It belonged to the boatman of the river.
With little energy I blew it long and thin,
Remembering what I had been taught,
Cupping it between my delicate hands.
On the edge of that feeble call
An apparition darkened the thick mist.
Slowly the bow emerged in the hush of dawn.
Beckoned me to his boat. Didn't tell him
Where to and he didn't ask, as if
My destination were already foreknown.
He didn't paddle. He hesitated.
He waited as if he had forgotten something.
Looked me straight in the eye.
When I didn't respond immediately,
He opened one bony hand,
The white palm trembling with greed.
The other hand gripped the head of a long pole.
Then I remembered what I had been taught:
I dropped a silver coin into his open palm.
He gripped it, dropped it into a bulging purse
That was tightly sewn to his leather belt.
The drop of silver on silver
Was the only sound in the soundless mist.
Only then did a fugitive grin light up his face.
Only then did he strike
The murky water with the pole.
There was no one to say goodbye to.
No friends. No kinsmen. No lovers.
The gurgle in the wake took the place of words.
The boat moved toward the other bank, where
He had unloaded his boat of so many strangers.