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Translator's Preface

George Kalogeris

Very little is known about the life of Lucretius (94-55BCE), a Roman philosopher/poet from the late Republic era. He wrote only one work, *De Rerum Natura* (*On the Nature of Things*), an unfinished didactic epic in six books in which he expounds the theories of Epicurus and the Atomist philosophers Leucippus and Democritus. In the poem, the universe is described as following mechanical laws, though in this otherwise deterministic system the soul and the mind are permitted a degree of free will by an intrinsic spontaneity in the movement of atoms: the infamous swerve.

Lucretius famously defended his decision to write Epicurean philosophy in verse by referring to the poetry as the "honey around the lip of the cup," a sweetness that was meant to help the reader digest the bitter medicine of its stringent message. What drew me to this particular passage is the way that the learned tone of the "science lecturer," in his effort to convey the material evidence for atomic theory, is overwhelmed by the fecundity and beauty of the natural world he is trying to put into words.

Though the Latin uses hexameter verse without regular stanza breaks, I chose to set my version in pentametrical tercets because I felt I could hear the poem, as a poem in English, better in this form. For one thing the tercets seemed to give the dense descriptions more breathing space, and to lend formal gravity by framing the philosopher's perceptions in lucid, rational units. On the other hand, the pentameter allowed me to keep a more intimate conversational tone; and because the stanzas are so short, the sudden shifts in emotion and the voluptuous stream of detail keep spilling over the line endings and stanza breaks. Thus I hope the form helps to convey both the stoic philosopher devoted to ataraxia (tranquility), as well as the racing heart of a man flooded with the sensuous brilliance of a world that seems to be taking shape before his eyes, like the combining and recombining atoms he describes. If St. Jerome is correct in stating that Lucretius was driven mad by a love-potion, I'd like to think that the philosopher's brimming cup was spiked with the honey of the Muses.

DE RERUM NATURA Book 2, lines 184-224

Nunc locus est, ut opinor, in his illud quoque rebus
confirmare tibi, nullam rem posse sua vi
corpoream sursum ferri sursumque meare.
ne tibi dent in eo flammaram corpora frudem;
sursus enim versus gignuntur et augmina sumunt
et sursum nitidae fruges arbustaque crescunt,
pondera, quantum in se est, cum deorsum cuncta ferantur.
nec cum subsiliunt ignes ad tecta domorum
et celeri flamma degustant tigna trabesque,
sponte sua facere id sine vi subiecta putandum est.
quod genus e nostro com missus corpore sanguis
emicat exultans alte spargitque cruorem.
nonne vides etiam quanta vi tigna trabesque
respuat umor aquae? nam quo magis ursimus altum

Selection from *On the Nature of Things* by Lucretius

Translated by George Kalogeris

ATOMIC MOVEMENT

And now I'd like to show you how such tiny
Particulars are moving. Once atoms take shape
As something, no matter what it is, Nature

Will never allow it to rise without the help
Of something else. Nothing can lift itself.
Though the hovering flame may seem composed of weightless

Particles, don't be fooled. All things are drawn
Inexorably to earth. And yet, we must also
Acknowledge that shining clusters of trees and crops

Have sprung from seeds, as if they were born to surge
Towards the sky. And just as a leaping flame
Can reach a roof-beam, and lick along the rafters

Until that voracious tongue devours the house,
So in the very same way a crimson spray
Of blood may gush from a wound, all but exultant

As it arches through the air. But don't assume
That either the fire or the blood can ever do this
Spontaneously: they always need some other

Force to reinforce them. Haven't you noticed
How powerfully a pool of water expels
Thick planks of wood? However many hands

transversosque volare per imbris fulmina cernis,
 nunc hinc nunc illinc abrupti nubibus ignes
 concursant; cadit in terras vis flammea volgo.
 Illud in his quoque te rebus cognoscere avemus,
 corpora cum deorsum rectum per inane feruntur
 ponderibus propriis, incerto tempore ferme
 incertisque locis spatio depellere paulum,
 tantum quod momen mutatum dicere possis.
 quod nisi declinare solerent, omnia deorsum
 imbris uti guttae caderent per inane profundum
 nec foret offensus natus nec plaga creata
 principiis; ita nihil umquam natura creasset.

That light, no matter how high it shines in the sky,
 Is bound to descend, just like everything else.
 Steeped in torrential rain, the lightning slants

Precipitously. But first it's the glow of cloudburst,
 Spreading like wildfire across the darkening sky
 As it crackles overhead. Then the abrupt bolt

Flashes like rods of the fasces in thunder's grip.
 Lightning, as everyone should know by now,
 Can strike at any place, and at any time.

Finally, there's one more point regarding matter
 That I wish to convey: even as atoms are falling
 Through empty space, each one dropping down

Straight as a plumb line, and carried along by the pull
 Of its own weight, at certain moments they swerve
 Together ever so slightly, and though it's just

Enough to say that a change in direction occurred,
 We can never predict where and when it will happen.
 And if this swerving never happened, then atoms

Would never collide with other atoms; and since
 Creation depends on the unpredictable impact
 Of colliding atoms, Nature would then have created

Nothing, though the atoms themselves would still
 Be falling through empty space, falling like drops
 Of rain falling by themselves forever.