

Moments, Causes

*Modern man has used cause-and-effect as ancient man used the gods
to give order to the Universe. This is not because it was the truest system,
but because it was the most convenient. —Henri Poincaré*

Moments arrive like mothers, inevitably
seamless and charming. History
is thunder following lightning,

two moments from one cause,
the seen and then the heard.
Even the blind, when a light is shone

from a heatless, strangered distance,
know the silent light's direction:
up or down—there, there, now.

But wait! When out of time, out of place,
one particular thing becomes another
unseemingly: the overlapping

like tops and bottoms of waves that is metaphor.
What are mothers for,
if not to teach us to swim

by showing us the motions of arms and legs
and red planets, of flavors and colors, fathers and lovers,
and holding our young bellies

until we put our faces in the water
with our breaths held?
Water, then, is breath taking,

and we float, suspended
in we know not what
until, knowing, we glide.

The Properties of Light and Villanelles

after Saint Lucy

A saint must be both particle and wave.

Beyond light is immeasurable mass.
The spaces between crests are what eyes crave.

One's good sight should not be scorched at the stake
Or left at local brothels, loose and fast.
A saint must be particular. The wave-

Length of red is long. Particles have
Shape and sort. Retinas gaze the unvast
Distance between crests. How eyes must crave

When pulled from a face to sit on a plate.
What if her eyes see only peaks that pass?
A saint must be all particle, all wave:

Matter and motion, part and parcel. Grave
Rods mistake a finger's pressure for blasts
Of space not mass. And crests can make eyes crave.

Lucy exchanges her eyes for favors
And holds her eyes so she can always cast.
A saint must be both particle and wave:
Between the crests, it's spaces her eyes crave.

Notes on a Few Atomic Scientists

*It is the light she longs to find,
When she delights in learning more.
Her world is learning: it defines
The destiny she's reaching for.
—Marie Curie*

I.

At nineteen, Albert Einstein picks up an apple and an orange in the market. Today, this is two, but there are many ways of counting, and, of course, he knows apples and oranges should never be compared. He wants both but does not buy either. His wife may not be strong enough to endure this kind of resistance.

II.

At the evening garden party, Marie Curie lifts a glowing test tube out of her pocket to show her colleagues what she has discovered. Everyone stares at her husband's hands in the strange light. Later, she smooths ointment on his hands and bandages them. She knows it is too late for anything more.

III.

Werner Heisenberg hikes all day at a steady pace to clear his head. It is too cold to swim, even for him. When he gets home, he remembers only one particular tree, the way its limbs arched as if growing. Or was that his wife lifting herself up from her garden, waving to him even? Or, he thinks, that may have been a different hike altogether.

IV.

Enrico Fermi listens to Neils Bohr carefully. Who wouldn't? He knows that later he will not remember if he was surprised at the question. He straightens his jacket as if that is answer enough. To accept a Nobel Prize is rarely such a difficult choice. His wife will be pleased, he will have to write a speech, and they will leave Italy.

V.

Just as the water begins to boil, Richard Feynman and his colleague realize that spaghetti, when snapped, breaks into three pieces. Always. They break all the spaghetti they have. He is sure there is a great theory involved. His first wife has been dead many years, and he misses their dinners. He knows he will be dead soon, too.