

TAP 534- 6: Three poems about particles

For many centuries, scientific ideas have inspired poets with raw material. These poems all deal with elementary particles, portraying everyday experiences and commenting on the scientific imagination.

Cosmic Gall

Neutrinos, they are very small.
They have no charge and have no mass
And do not interact at all.
The earth is just a silly ball
To them, through which they simply pass,
Like dust maids down a drafty hall
Or photons through a sheet of glass.
They snub the most exquisite gas,
Ignore the most substantial wall,
Cold-shoulder steel and sounding brass,
Insult the stallion in his stall,
And, scorning barriers of class,
Infiltrate you and me! Like tall
And painless guillotines they fall
Down through our heads into the grass.
At night, they enter at Nepal
And pierce the lover and his lass
From underneath the bed – you call
It wonderful; I call it crass.

by John Updike

From: John Updike 1964 *Telephone Poles and Other Poems* (London: Andre Deutsch)

Nomad

The particle scientist
is more or less
happy. He has no home.

All his ladders
go straight down
and claim the nameless.

by Anthony Piccione

From: Anthony Piccione 1977 *Anchor Dragging Poems* (BOA Editions)

Little Cosmic Dust Poem

Out of the debris of dying stars,
this rain of particles
that waters the waste with brightness;

the sea-wave of atoms hurrying home,
collapse of the giant,
unstable guest who cannot stay;

the sun's heart reddens and expands,
his might aspiration is lasting,
as the shell of his substance
one day will be with frost.

In the radiant fields of Orion
great hordes of stars are forming,
just as we see every night, fiery and faithful to the end.

Out of the cold and fleeing dust
that is never and always,
the silence and the waste to come –

this arm, this hand,
my voice, your face, this love.

by John Haines

From Bonnie Bilyeu Gordon 1985 *Songs From Unsung Worlds* (Boston, MA: Birkhauser)

Practical advice

Each in their own way, these poets reflect on the success of the scientific imagination. Is their aim to grasp the incredible ideas better through the language of poetry? Certainly they link astronomical and nuclear scales to the human scale of reality.

External references

This activity is taken from Advancing Physics chapter 17, 20T

These poems, and many others inspired by science, are published in:

Carey J (ed.) 1995 The Faber Book of Science (London: Faber & Faber)

Ferris T (ed.) 1991 The World Treasury of Physics, Astronomy and Mathematics (Boston, MA: Little, Brown)