

# Two poems

## ASKOLD SKALSKY

### SKEPTIC DAYS

Back then the method of physics  
was to determine whether phenomena  
were signs of hidden realities,  
whether when Odysseus unbound his ears  
to the Sirens, the memory of their song  
had forever deranged him to the degree  
that he thought he remembered lifetimes  
on the shadowy stones of the Cretan palaces  
after his ship had rounded Cape Malea  
and was blown off course by a vicious squall  
churned up by the god's trident  
dragging the waves, the giant horses,  
their manes flashing and hooves rearing,  
snorting spume and salt spray across the mast  
and rigging terror into the men's eyes,  
they who had long ago stopped hoping and were ready  
for the sides to splinter like a cracked axe-haft.  
For how else could he have told the story  
with his quick archaic tongue skillfully limning  
the stairwells shafted with daylight  
between the tapered pillars, dark red and floating  
down the lustral baths of the snake-clad goddess,  
the swineherd's mouth dropping at this stranger  
who spoke of such wonders across a sea  
that still turned the air young with the light's surface  
so that already in the decaying stages  
of the first centuries when the great dogmatisms  
were receding under the stressful testimony  
of the eternal sameness of things,

some had already begun to question by what right  
 could the cause of such multiple phenomena  
 be reduced to the unity of a single substance.

### WHAT NOW, HERACLITUS?

I have tasted the fresh exhalations of the sea  
 while the rocks went through invisible changes,  
 consumed by steady cycles of earth.  
 I have let the bright bowl of the sun bake me in my skin,  
 unreplenished by mundane fires.  
 I have fasted, I have prayed,  
 read wonders in the ancient books  
 with asterisks like tiny stars  
 huddled in the distant corners of the page.  
 I have lived a while and not seen  
 my ages turn into their opposites.  
 I am here in the hospital room  
 with a view of the Blue Ridge,  
 clinging to the breath like a root,  
 waiting for the contraries to kick in,  
 feeling the counterstretch of hot and cold,  
 the hungry fears of the dark  
 quickening in the light.  
 My dry efficient soul tenses  
 like a spider over its damaged web,  
 like a deranged bowstring,  
 like the unwilling harmonies of a lyre  
 perishing in clumsy hands  
 as I look out the window,  
 the blue curl of the Catocins far away,  
 the row houses below me with red bricks  
 capped by flat white roofs  
 ranged in little squares down Hager Street.

I have stepped twice into the same river.