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Unhealing

Pla ce bo!

—John Skelton, *Philip Sparrow*

Her vespers sung for Philip Sparrow, Jane,
entitled to relief of sorrow, got
instead unwelcome praise from polyglot
but zany poet of the court. Again
we see how good intentions often drain
their subject's patience to the lees, a blot
on all the tribes of guilds and scribes who jot:
placebo turned nocebo compounds pain.
Poor Skelton, Laureate, a favored don,
a tutor to a king, still had to trim
his pen and scrawl an apologia.
Jane Scrope, for her part, may have thought him dim,
his Latin-larded verse a flagrant con:
what dose could cure, once cat unsealed its claw?

Medicinal

Lucretius noticed the unnaturalness
of things, the jamais vu aspect of sky,
and even skin, when one has spent time less
in observation than in scraping by.
There's nothing for it, try as druggists will
to brew or grind a fitting anodyne
and bring to market phial, salve, or pill;
estrangement breeds the powders they refine.
So when it comes to morphine, we're not shy,
but ask, "What do drugs dream?" and "Who is pain?"
inured to naturalness that won't comply
with chemistry yet swarms in every grain.
Unnatural naturalness compounds a spell
where balm may kill while sugar pill makes well.

Antioxidants

I used to take tea with a dash of milk,
until I read the milk undid some good
the tea might do me. No more suave-as-silk
dilution. Tea would brace me as it should,
with antioxidants, to counteract
free radicals, whatever they are (I
flubbed Chemistry), which otherwise attacked,
I read, defenseless cells and bade them die.
To me it seemed a diplomatic gaffe
to let small molecules run riot just
to smooth out strength of cup of tea. You laugh.
Take cream, you say, your taste's the tongue to trust.
You'd force me to a choice between two lives:
what shall I pour, now, when tea tray arrives?

Spices

One by one the spices' dates slip by,
the best-by dates, the use-by dates, the dates
I can't make out despite how much I try.
"Organic" loses flavor. "Natural" waits
for me to find the recipe that calls
for hint of it, which recipe is lost.
I will not list the spices. Each name galls,
each bottle, tin, and phial extracts a cost,
each last you'll ever bring home from the store.
I use each sparingly of course. How bland
my cooking gets, we'll have to see. Buy more
is off the table. I'd sooner salt with sand.
I shake some crushed leaves left in reused jar
with jotted label. Mark me, they'll go far.

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