



Christopher Bernard

Narcissus and the Stoic

In the absence of power
there is always a mirror.
In the absence of love
there is always a flame.

The Stoic, wisest of men,
advised *ataraxia* and *apatheia* –
detachment and peace of mind.
Have no care where you have no control.
You cannot make them, love or fame,
power or wealth, at your wish, come
(though this world,
to a woman and man,
likes to pretend it thinks it can);
they and only they decide

when to sweep you into their arms,
when to let you down at the next corner.
Either way, you are helpless as a child.

Let Echo be my lover.
Let friendship be my fame.
Let few needs be my fortune.
Let a walk in the evening by the ocean be my power.

Narcissus was a great Stoic
til he grasped for what he couldn't have,
and drowned.

Be content to stare into the pool
and watch the clouds scudding all around you.

Live, set no store by it,
as you would a lively game.
Enjoy the enchanting circus of life,
enjoy the tragic circus of life.
The clowns cavort, tumble, howl
with laughter, the dagger thrower
makes the blood run cold,
the acrobats jam the air with flight,
the elephants lean into the arena's night.

It is amazing what they do.
Who? Why, everybody.
I think that I will try the trapeze.
I will live as though it is the one needful,
the vital, essential, important thing ,
poised above the glitter and dust
of a most maculate universe –
because, for the moment, to me, it *is*
the needful, vital, important thing
I must face and cannot avoid,
a matter of death and life –
if only to give me the thrill
I feel on the razor's edge between being and the void.

Though I know that it is nothing more –
my life, the world, the universe –
than a game, though astonishing (look at that galaxy
hanging on to nothingness like a monkey!)
in which watchers and acrobats
take turns, flying under the circus tent
and sitting in the stands,
holding our breath, our hearts pounding,
applauding, weeping, cheering.

It adds to the fun to take it all absolutely seriously, of course,
as though the fate of the universe depended on the purity of one's soul.
Sometimes you just need to forget the sawdust, the lights, the stink of the
lions,
the terrifying clowns.

I am here, after all.
I may as well live.
It is the most miraculous sport.

And my fellow gamesmen –
that awkward man by the nets,
that pretty girl letting fly her ball –
they *are* sweet, they come and go like starlings.

Christopher Bernard is the founder and a co-editor of *Caveat Lector* and author of the novel *A Spy in the Ruins*.

Image: “Flying Trapeze in Midtown Manhattan,” from Babesta Blog.