



Salt crystals. From Wikimedia Commons

Christopher Bernard

Salt

Five billion.

Years, if one can call them that,
before there was any to measure them.
The number itself a hopeless fling
toward the futile husks of knowledge.

No, I can't grasp it.
One is dignified, calm.
Two is charged with life,
a dozen is almost cozy,
a hundred has heft,
a thousand has grandeur;

a million inspires awe.
But a billion....!
Nothing!
The mind curls up into a ball, and goes blank.

Raining light on the earth,
like a third degree,
vastnesses of light
out of greater vastnesses of darkness.
Until a crystal forest,
with immeasurable slowness,
thrust its head from the ground
and raised its face—its many faces—
above a perpetually drunken earth
spinning like a Sufi in the darkness.

Between a vice of rock and light,
between the hammers of past and future,
darkness presses into diamonds
microbes, birds, shards,
graves, civilizations,
a quantum of memes, a fugue of poems,
triumphs, extinctions. The dancing
and singing of the sun,
itself even older
by billions upon billions of years
(the thought aches the brain),
in a universe even older than that,
and what of the multiverse!—

like a scratch of falling star across the eyelid of the night,

like crumbs of salt dropped into a pot,
with enough time, just, for each to say,
turning to each other before dissolving, “I loved you.”

No, I can't grasp it.
Perhaps wasn't meant to.
Perhaps was only meant to sleep,
like my cat most of the day,
like you who sleep through the long night of your life,

twitching and stirring under the flight of dreams,
the salt dissolving sweetly on your tongue.

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