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Poems

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Lucretius on optical illusions

by [A E Stallings](#)

From “De rerum natura,” book four

In the first century B.C., amidst the constant turmoil and upheaval of the late Roman Republic, a poet named Titus Lucretius Carus, about whom we know next to nothing, composed one of the unlikeliest masterpieces of Western literature: an epic-length didactic poem in Latin hexameters on atomic theory and Epicurean philosophy, known to us as *De Rerum Natura*, “On the Nature of Things.” It probably seemed as curious then as now. Prose, not poetry, was the vehicle for philosophy in the first century, and Greek, not Latin, was its proper language. Epicurus himself would, in theory, have frowned on this mode for his gospel—he disapproved of poetry—but for Lucretius, poetry was the honey that helped the bitter (and salutary) medicine of philosophy go down.

Part of Lucretius’s genius is his ability to demonstrate difficult abstract concepts with concrete, everyday examples. They a ...

A E Stallings's latest collection of poetry is *Hapax* (TriQuarterly).

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