

from Simple Verses

José Martí

Cuba

Translated by Manuel A. Tellechea

I know of Egypt and Niger,
Of Persia and Xenophon, no less,
But more than these I prefer
The fresh mountain air's caress.

5 I know the ancient histories
Of man and his struggles for power,
But I prefer the buzzing bees
That hover round the bellflower.

I know the sound the wind made
10 When through the boughs it was flying:
Let no one tell me I'm lying,
There is no song as well played.

I know of a frightened fawn
That seeks the fold to expire,
15 And of a heart weary-worn
That dies hidden without ire.

1 Egypt and Niger: The African countries of Egypt and Niger were sites of important ancient civilizations.

2 Persia and Xenophon (zén'ə-fen): Persia is the former name of Iran; Xenophon was a Greek commander who led a troop of soldiers in the service of a Persian prince.

14 seeks the fold to expire: returns home to die.

16 ire: anger.

José Martí (1853–1895, Cuba)

Martí was born to Spanish parents in Cuba. A literary revolutionary as well as a political revolutionary who fought for Cuban independence from Spain, he was sentenced to six years of hard labor when he was a teenager. Based on that experience, Martí wrote "El presidio político de Cuba" (The Political Prison in Cuba [1871]), which served not only as a condemnation of the Spanish authorities but more importantly as a landmark in the evolving Latin American *modernismo* movement to which Martí was a main contributor. After being exiled to Spain, where he received his formal education, he traveled to Mexico, Guatemala, Venezuela, and finally New York, where he worked for the *New York Sun*. Martí's poetry focuses on man, both in terms of human cruelty and the potential for people to adapt and survive. PRINCIPAL WORKS: *Ismaelillo* (1882), *Versos sencillos* (1891), *Versos libres* (1913)