

## WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED ABOUT THE PINEAL

Descartes knew, being, knew  
that so central an organ confined  
mechanism and mind, entwined.  
But the gland held back being

of use, except to lizards, who,  
(Descartes liked dissection)  
deprived of it couldn't change  
skin's tint. In man it calcifies

to an X-ray beacon, and that is  
all we could do with this small  
centrality, till Aaron Lerner,  
awash in kilos of bovine pineals,

extracted melatonin, N-acetyl-  
5-methoxytryptamine, a mine  
of a name, a hormone that did  
bleach tadpoles. In lampreys,

the tuatara, the gland rises  
on a thin stalk from the brain,  
an unblinking eye just below  
the skin. But our pineal, light

insensitive, just pours out  
melatonin all the time, more  
in the dark so in diurnal rhyme,  
seasons timed in chemical levels.

Some depressions are eased  
by bright light. In hamsters  
melatonin sets sex cycles, but  
J. Arendt says: "...given to normal

subjects at a time of day (late  
afternoon) calculated to maximize  
any sexually related effects,"  
just makes them sleepy. So not

the seat of the soul, but still  
a gland to reckon with, a gland  
to tell time. Descartes died  
of a fever in Queen Christina's

sunshorn February Sweden.

Some of the material in this poem derives from an article by Josephine Arendt in *New Scientist*, 25 July 1985, p. 36.