

“Darkly, ... Then Face to Face”

—*I Corinthians 13*

We were ten. We'd made our first communion, confessed our prepubescent sins, had shots for polio and tetanus. Our left arms bore a tidy smallpox scar—rites of viral Passover. In spring, Father Flanagan blessed our throats with two crossed candles, calling down the stoically beheaded Saint Blaise to guard us from “all bodily and spiritual harm.” Innocents, we marched at ease through church past a hand-carved crucifixion, Bartholmew flayed In roseate stained-glass, a bronze Ignatius torn by lions, Lucia painted burning at the stake.

But no tincture, ritual, or saint could quell our fear of Mr. Paro's gaze. At Sunday mass, I'd turn my head when I held the paten to his throat, his tongue stuck out to take the Eucharist he couldn't see palms raised in supplication, the same beseeching look he must have had the night his store was robbed, his eyes gouged out by the thumbnails of a man careful to avoid i.d. in any lineup, photograph, or sketch, a man who left with \$21 and still moves among us, in polished shoes perhaps and aftershave, his guardian angel vigilant as ours.

Full Circle

*"If you lived on the far side of the moon,
you might never know the earth existed."*
—Daad Safarini

Moonlight tilts in their glasses,
slivered by the ice, as if these shards
were what they meant to drink,
cut with gin and lime—stirring
reflections in two old friends
who lie on the beach in an off season,
together finally after years apart.
One of them, an engineer,
draws in the wet sand—circles, arcs,
orbits—wiping them clear
several times to correct the scale
or clarify—leisurely, kindly,
above the breakers' roar—what the other,
a salesman, seems to miss
in the sky's geometry, as he missed it
years ago in high school,
the slight difference in their powers
of abstraction still evident
in what they notice, fail to notice,
about the world, themselves, each other.
As boys they lay like this
along the shore of Lake Ontario,
their grown-up lives too far away
to fathom, like the Canadian horizon—
ignorable, unmenacing, and dull.
Tonight the sharp Pacific air
suggests the wider world in which they drift

in and out of one another's view, linked
by the gravity of a common start.
At forty their lives have begun to change,
death and divorce, turnings
and half-turnings of the heart,
though they broach such matters
cautiously—advancing, retreating—
unsure of themselves, not wishing to offend.
“Imagine a full earth from the moon,”
says the engineer, reversing the angle
of the familiar pattern, ignoring
for a moment the familiar patterns
in his friend's life, those patterns—
less familiar, irreversible—in his own.
“Or imagine you're on the moon
but you can't see the earth. Ever.”
To make his point, he stands,
brushes off his pants,
and makes a wobbly three-foot *0*
in the sand. Inside he draws a question mark,
on which he sets, with elaborate display,
his keys, his wallet, and his empty glass.
He puts his heels against the line
and makes one outward-facing loop,
his eyes fixed straight ahead
so that nothing in the *0* he tracks
is visible—just the clear night,
the full moon, the high tide,
just his friend looking up
at the dizzying coincidence
of orbit and revolution. Soon they sit
in silence, too old, now to sustain

their boyhood fantasy of life
on the moon, imagining how it might be
to occupy the outer hemisphere,
moon-men taking comfort in their charts
and tables, the myths and legends
that explained their peculiar climate,
their four-week day, too tired tonight
to recall their lunar Magellan
crossing the sharp divide to see
one morning rising before him
the thing he should have known but didn't,
the force that lay behind his every turn,
a shape around which he'd revolved,
unknowing, all those years.

On the Origin of Wings

“The feathered wing may have evolved in dinosaurs—not for locomotion or prey capture but for courtship display.”

—*Science*, October 25, 2012

Forget the angels--the susurrus of cherubim
and seraphim. Forget Hermes, Nike, the Phoenix
and its ash. Start instead with some ungainly
earthbound dinosaur waving his scrawny,
sparsely feathered arms in sexual display.
Think pompoms. Fan dance. Teenaged boys
puffing up their chests. Think of me,
lizard-skinned, taloned, desperate with want,
oblivious of lift and yaw, trudging across
a wordless jungle floor, flapping my ratty plumes,
intent on luring you near, coaxing your curved
pelvis to the ground, hoping you'll part your legs.
Watch me, startled suitor, tripling the tempo
of my gravid semaphore and rising through the air.

Backward and Upside Down: A Sestina for 1968

Dick Fosbury won a high jump gold medal at the 1968 Olympics with a revolutionary technique known as the "Fosbury Flop."

Backward! And upside down! A flop on top.
Wrong was right. Was black ... white? In '68
high-jumping Foz leapt forward. In reverse.

In '68, the summer games kicked off the fall.
Fosbury looked whacked, a voodoo child,
upside down like Hendrix's guitar.
Black magic and a hippie's quantum leap ...
Back home, the whitewashed war was dominoes,
high-times for Wallace, polishing his badge.

"High, high, high, higher ..." on the radio
in '68. Tune in, turn on, drop out. Flash-
backs were the tab for LSD. Dick
Fosbury couldn't jump the normal way.
Black was just becoming beautiful, and
"uppity" was something white men said

up in arms when Smith and Carlos raised—
high into the darkening Aztec night—
black fists against the anthem and the flag.
In '68 that kind of thing was brave.
Fosbury said so. Most white men did not
back then even after what they'd seen in

backwater Memphis: James Earl Ray turned hope

upside down—shooting Dr. Martin Luther King.
Fosbury fell back into the pit.
High jumping was a game. The stakes were steep
in '68 when Johnson said he wouldn't run.
Black voters stood with Robert Kennedy and

black blood ran from his wounded head. No turning
back Sirhan Sirhan ... so we went on
in '68, mistook Son My, then turned it
upside down: *My Son, My Son*. Forsaken, why?
High, high, high, higher ... the upright foes
Foz buried. No burial for those villagers, no

Fosbury, no dominoes, the day
black men and white moved through My Lai.
High, high, high ... the raped and massacred
backfill for a ditch: 347 innocents
upside down
in '68.

Epiphany

Although the first ones marked descents of gods,
more often they've been localized, small-scale
descents of men, usually painful
in the clarifying, private sort of way
that's suitable for freshman texts: Orwell
crosshairing India with his elephant;
the boy in "Araby" pocketing his coin—
Vanity! Vanity! booming in his ears.

Sometimes a single light can singe an age,
as Herod read the sky and sensed the end
congealing in the body of a child,
or Darwin turned from Malthus in the night,
his fine-boned fingers trailing off a page
as bright as any star had ever burned.