

“MT. LEMMON: STEWARD OBSERVATORY, 1990”

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“darkmatter: Poems of Space”

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What it takes to dazzle us, masters of dazzle,
all of us here together at the top of the world,
is a night without neon or mercury lamps.
Black sheen flowing above,
the stars, unnamed and disorderly –
diamonds, a ruby or sapphire,
scattered and made
more precious for being cut
from whatever strand
once held them together.
The universe is emptiness and dust,
occasional collisions, collapsing zones of gas,
electrical bursts, and us.

Here is the 60-inch scope where
we struggle to see one pinpoint of light,
each singularity with its timid twinkle
become a city of stars, that trapezoidal
grouping at the end of Orion’s sword,
a cloudy nursery spawning
galactic stuff, lit but not illuminated
by a glassy hot blue star. What is it to see?
A mechanism wired in the brain
that leads to wonder. What is it
to wonder but to say
what we’ve seen and, having said it,
need to see farther.

Here are the globulars and spirals,
the dumbbell, ring and Crab—particles
swept like water in a drain, shapes
mapping the torque that shapes them,
tension of matter, micro- and
macro-scopic, orbiting, electron
and planet straining at apogee
like a husky on the leash.
Here is Pegasus, the Great Square—
call it the Baseball Diamond, a story
we can see, one we can use
to find our way back. A scientist

can say *NGC 5194/5*, to another
and the other says, *Ahhh*,
picturing the massive whirlpool, its
small companion galaxy eddying by its side.

Call it the Nipple with a nearby Mole,
Call it the Chief Executive Officer
walking his Spitz. Describing *is* imagining—
knowing, not knowing but
having the language
to convey, to *be* the water carrier,
Aquarius, to quench another.
I saw it with my own eyes.
Seeing is believing.
That paloverde tree is green.
On earth as it is in heaven.
But the sky is not blue
and the stars are not a drifting dome,
merely coordinates plotted on
the immensity inside—
the Eternity we walk in when we dream.

Still the universe (the way we see it)
is more real than Heraclitus,
who said the stars were solid bowls
filled with fire, fire which feeds
on the ocean's watery breath.
Why not, since water is consumed
By fire, imagine it as food?
Why not think the brain's
favorite food is seeing?
We still don't know what light is.
Where matter comes from. How the dust
became fire. Why our fire must
turn to dust. And all we have to go on
(refining the instrument) is our selves –
the skin at the tips of our fingers.

All we have to go on is ignorance –
to pay attention to what we've missed.
tides? Amorph –
one scientist's notation in
The Atlas of Galaxies
beneath a shapeless smudge.
They have to take it seriously, everything
they see, trying to invent

a way to pass it on. In this
They are poets as much as
the visitor who says,
Ohhh, a shooting star,
after she's been told
nothing is burning, nothing shooting,
merely molecules of sky jumping
as dust from beyond whizzes by.
Here is the world's biggest mirror –
a million dollars to cast
the glass in hexagonal molds,
to spin the gleaming saucer
parabolic, then a computer
to cool it cell by cell –
six weeks of that and then another
million, two years to polish
the surface to digital perfection.
Here are those gods and goddesses
seen for what they are – battered rock
and frigid gas, sulfur boiling out
into murderous air –
all of us here together
watching from our blue oasis,
whirling in a frozen fading night
where there is not enough
matter to explain why any of it
is here.

Consider the moon. A fault
visible tonight near the terminator
looks like a crease in fresh plaster.
Sea of Rains, Ocean of Storms.
But it has ever been moist.
never felt dew or rivers.
Marsh of Sleep, Sea of Ingenuity –
a map of our misunderstanding.
The wonder is we still can see
the way it pours liquid pearl
over the earth's dark waters
after we know its windless surface,
that impacable dust the moon travelers said
smelled like cap guns, is cratered
with a wire-braced flag, two lunar jeeps,
and footprints no weather will arrive to erase

Here is the observatory at 1 a.m.,
white domes humming on the mountain top
like brains, antennae feeling
(a mechanism wired) their way
into the wilderness. They won't explain
a thing about the wealth
of blackberries in Labrador,
or the sleep of velvet bats
hanging in the eaves drugged by the sun.
They won't fix history or touch the places
inside we can't get close to.
Looking up, we just keep falling.
Here are the owls who navigate
in darkness, here the scattered prey.