



Parhelion above the Pacific, Ocean Beach, San Francisco, December 31, 2017 (Photo by author)

Christopher Bernard

Three Poems

Phantom Sun

Walking out of the city grunge
into an immense canvas by Turner:

cerulean, lapis, crimson,

whorls of pinks and pale greens
like stains of grass and roses,

a dissolving ship of coal smoke,

mauve,

the whispering lips of angels,

and a trace of crushed pine smoking into yellow,

against, smudged with ivory,
a profoundly incautious night,

scoured by—

not the cyclops of the darkness in the molten azure of the lake of the cave
of the sky—

but a glaring splotch of perpetual fusion
reaction roaring silently against the stars

and, like a hole in a mask,

a second,

a hooded mirage
in a heavy, slow blink of nimbo-cumulus
within the claw of tongues of the welkin's chaos.

An illusion.

The eyes
of God.

Love and Faith and Science and the *Times*

I was having a beer with my friend, the atheist.
I was sharing the latest issue of the *Times*
on my smartphone between us,
displaying what I thought he would find
an interesting article.

The headline read as follows:
“There Is No Such Thing as Love.”
It had been, the article said, scientifically proven.
The selfish gene would not have it.
There was lust,
exquisite as acid on gold.
There was even a lazy pleasure
in a certain body's proximity
when it outstayed not its welcome.
There was the pleasure of imposing the obstreperous ego

upon another body and mind,
the exquisite satisfaction of inflating oneself
inside another head:
what else were the joys of tyranny
and of art's wanton thrill?
All of this was adaptive, said the article,
quoting a faceless biologist.

And then, of course, there is habit:
the familiar shadow
on the corridor wall,
the silhouette in the garden,
the footfall in the living room,
the musky smell in the sheets.
This reinforces the survival of the species,
and thus of the monster twined in the chromosome
like the Minotaur in his labyrinth.

There is the notorious obsession,
the adolescent psychosis,
that makes life seem all a glory,
ineffable, bewitching, sublime,
with its suffering made meaningful,
its emptiness a garden
of almost unbearable enchantment,
and for a brief hour,
the long humiliation of human
life seems worth the time.
But even the scientists quoted in the *Times*
were not yet altogether certain
how something so clearly maladaptive
ever survived natural selection.
(My own, completely nonscientific, theory
is that no completely rational species
would ever reproduce
in the prison of time and matter
we call the universe,

and so, to be induced to replicate,
we need to go out of our minds.)

Is human life worth living
without that thing biologists
have just proven scientifically,
like God and immortality,
does not, *and in fact cannot actually exist?*

The human race, let's face it, is not
lovable once babyhood is securely behind us,
and, as for the rest of it,
there's nothing but dust and gas and stones,
whirling energetically in a space that is
incalculably vast and, fundamentally, dark.

No love. Not much intelligence either,
since we are blocked from reality by our own minds
(this was also proven by science quite recently,
though scientists don't seem to realize
this renders null and void
this and every single one of their other claims: they're just
deluded fools like the rest of us).

We are condemned to live in cages
of darkness and ignorance and pain,
mocked and terrified by our own delusions
from the cradle to the schoolroom to the office
to the retirement home to the hospice to the grave.

Neither love, then, nor faith, nor science,
those tawdry shadows of God,
to console us or to save us—
all we seem to have is the *Times*.
So: what are we to do?

I told all this to my atheist friend
as our beers lost their heads and went flat in the bar:
my dark little thread of speculation
(my smartphone still lay quietly (it hadn't
jingled in the last quarter of an hour) between us),
hoping he would join me in an interesting debate
that might further our mutual enlightenment.
I thought he would appreciate the logic,
so elegant and simple and clear,
that I had spun from this posting from the *Times*,
the liberal's bible, the secularist's Book.
But his eyes burned with a fury,
and I thought he would burn me at the stake.

This

When you go down in this frail barque
where moths ring roses round the bell

that signs the air with the seagull's call
and ashes draw their bitter herbs

like shiftless snow left to swarm
like bees among the apple boughs,

and the winds blow through the black canyons
of the heart's mountains, and the jaded horn
of mystery and love sounds far
away, then in your bruised, cupped hands

a delicate universe will emerge
forgetful of what has become
in fretful dreams of little boys
and young girls' hopes; though even then

the winter will enclasp in spring
the seeds of summer, rains of fall,
the grasp of the sun on the rim
of the horizon's twilight of dust,

and you will call me from the grasp
of sleep and from this lullaby
(for, yes, it is a lullaby)
and raise your fist until it shakes
awake the eyes of the sleeping god
who blindly plants the wandering seed
over stone and hardpack field

and sings his crazy song in the wind
and breaks the boughs of the childlike trees
and thunders above the cowering
valleys, fells the wolf and jackal,
fills the night with groans of bliss
and ghosts into nothing an intoxicating kiss.

And you will deny this and this
as you go down in this frail barque
that seethes on the bitter seas of chance,
defying this, the chaos and the dark.

Christopher Bernard is co-editor of the webzine *Caveat Lector*. His most recent collection of poems is titled *Chien Lunatique* and his most recent novel *Voyage to a Phantom City*. His poems can also be founded on his poetry blog *The Bog of St. Philinte*.