



Image from Wikipedia (*Study after Velazquez*, by Francis Bacon)

Andy Roberts

The Black Lights

A failed recreation of Bobo Brazil's
Coco-Butt put Tommy Bradshaw
into Bed 12B of the room we shared
at Nationwide Children's Hospital,

Columbus, Ohio, December 1969.

Tommy with his huge head shaved white,
seamed with stitches like a baseball.

I was strapped down to a series of
nearly continuous grand mal seizures,
in which my brain created a terrifying
kaleidoscope of progressively darker
flashing lights, causing me to bite my
tongue in half. It was reattached with
forty-three stitches and swelled to
twice its normal size. Speech remained
difficult, the smell horrendous.

Last night, at a friend's house,
St. Augustine, Florida, September 2025,
paging through a nine-pound
book of Francis Bacon paintings,
I stopped at *Study after Velasquez*—
a picture of the caged pope screaming.
I looked over at Tommy,
stitches leaking, scabbed over,
staining the pillow red.
I closed my eyes, the universe
exploding in my head, expanding
out beyond the milk and stars,
where the black lights blink and beckon.
Jamming four fingers of my left hand
into my mouth to save my tongue
once again, the old smell of copper.

Andy Roberts is the author of nine collections of poetry. His latest book is *My Favorite Failures* (Half Inch Press, 2025). His work has appeared in *American Life In Poetry*, *Atlanta Review*, *Fulcrum*, *Illuminations*, *Lake Effect*, *The MacGuffin*, *The Midwest Quarterly*, *Roanoke Review*, and *Slipstream*. He lives in Columbus, Ohio where he handles finances for disabled veterans.