

## JESUIT CHEMISTRY

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*T. Clayton Wood*

I saw the nearsighted priest  
as a grotesque Gloucester.  
Behind him hung Christ.

The room smelled of sulfur.  
Two tubes, one with a flame  
under it, stood in one corner.

The priest drew diagrams,  
reciting chapters from Exodus—  
God giving water from stone, telling Moses, “I am.”

Then he would tell us,  
though apparently empty,  
inside the tube occurred the miraculous.

He referred to Gethsemane  
when we failed to hide  
our boredom. What we couldn't see

in the tube, but identified  
as hydrogen and oxygen,  
dripped into the other tube, transmogrified

as water, the sunlight  
oozing through the windows.  
Water and light.

Two ways to anticipate the end of class  
after the clock stopped at half-past two.  
The priest called after us

during Lent on cue,  
when we went for the door like quicksilver,  
dashing for the back pew:

“Mass, and not what delivers  
you blindly faithful  
from this class, is the measure

of matter and gravitation,  
though indefinable, describes  
the force of matter’s attraction.”

\*

The amount of mole is all I remember  
learning. The priest illustrated the number,  
saying a mole of oranges would cover  
the surface of the earth.  $6.02252 \times 10^{23}$ —abstract,  
even absurd.

For me, it remained a small purblind insectivore  
with enormous claws. Rarely seen, but known for  
the hollow furrows that a child’s weight could  
cave in.

Passages made to some place further on.

And after meeting you, the beauty mark  
on the small of your back that I finger in the dark  
with eyes shut, a bit of Braille  
signifying longing’s actual scale:

as the first letter of the first number,  
an incalculable integer. Even for Avogadro. And  
for God.

\*

The priest passed  
a small vial around  
during the last class.  
Half filled with Mercury,  
the bottle had a specific gravity  
like grief, a density almost unfathomable,  
but it kept exams from blowing off the table.

I turned my final back in blank but for  
my name scrawled in the space  
left for it in the top left corner—  
tribute to zeros in a mole,  
to what it delimits as whole,  
to what is lost but can still be felt  
in the chest as weight.