

JESUIT CHEMISTRY

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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.”

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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. 6.02252×10^{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.