

Meditations on the Heavens

Emma Lou Thayne

ON THE NIGHT OF 16 NOVEMBER 1985, Halley's Comet was said to be visible just to the right of the Seven Sisters, the Pleiades, in the eastern sky. That night, ten of us from the William Stafford poetry workshop walked New Smyrna Beach, Florida, to look through four pairs of binoculars, each taking a turn with each pair.

Naive, uninformed viewer of the skies, I took my turn, skeptical of seeing anything but milky ways at every focusing. Instead, after scanning left and right, up and down, I called out with amazement. Near, but not at, the place we had been instructed to look, there darted a bright, flamboyant light. I handed the binoculars to others, said, "See? See?" I wanted urgently, needed them to see. None could.

Laughing but strangely serious, we passed the binoculars back and forth, trying. Every time I had the binoculars, any pair, any strength, the light reappeared, clear as the Pleiades, the only other stars I also could spot on cue. In vain I pointed out the exact place for the others: "Look — see the star, very bright, just down from Pleiades? Now, see the two not-so-bright stars just down and left of that? Now, make an equilateral triangle with those. At the apex is this light."

All more experienced with heavens and binocular sighting than I, they all tried — and tried hard, wanted to find something as much as I wanted them to. No one saw. "You must be wiggling the glasses," "It's a UFO, Emma Lou," they said, not making fun, just having fun, not disbelieving me, yet not I think actually believing I would make it up.

At that point, it would have been easier to deny it. But I couldn't. Bracing my elbows on a shoulder or the door of a car, trying to pick the light up any-

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where else, using different glasses, taking time between viewings — no matter what, that light kept appearing to me. In exactly the same place. And only to me.

Finally one of my friends — and they *were* friends, poets I'd been working with for ten days talking about translations and being "witnesses" and having a "prepared mind," all possibilities for writers under the calm/exciting character and expertise of William Stafford, our master teacher — one of them said, the others smiling, "Oh well, Emma Lou, we know you come from a visionary background." We laughed, congenial and comfortable but still puzzled.

And then we walked home along the hard, rippled Atlantic beach. Sticking up through the packed sand in the slim moonlight, a bright shell caught my eye. A collector's item, I knew, even before Jean, our naturalist, said, "Rare, especially on a driving beach like this where cars in the daytime crush so much. It's an angel wing."

Back in my room, against the lamp, it was almost translucent, finely colored, shaped exactly like a wing from an old icon or an angel in an early Christian painting.

Our assignment for the next day was a *pantoum*, a form I'd never heard of; none of us had. It's Malaysian with repeating lines in this pattern: abcd, bedf, egfh, gihj, iajc — the repeating lines gathering new weight and freight with each reappearance. I found myself writing about the angel wing and the comet.

FIRST MEDITATION: THE COMET IS AN ANGEL WING

Angel wings are on the beach
I found one shining in the sand
One late night looking for the comet
The celestial body we'd been told would be near Pleiades

I found one shining in the sand
A long curved vapor tail
Like the celestial body we'd been told would be near Pleiades
But this was by the moon's first lifted lid

A long curved vapor tail
Striated fragile rippled bone of wave tide wind
This was by the moon's first lifted lid
The shell as smooth and rough as what we walk

Striated fragile rippled bone of wave tide wind
Arising when the comet's head approaches sun
The shell was as smooth and rough as what we walk
The beach made hard by driving in the day

Arising when the comet's head approaches sun
 Angel wings are on the beach
 The beach made hard by driving in the day
 I found one, one late night looking for the comet

I went to bed, the *pantoum* vibrating in my mind, thinking about visions and about seeing something invisible to everyone else, yet undeniably there to me. When I woke the next morning, the first lines of this second *pantoum* were there:

SECOND MEDITATION: THE COMET IS A CERTAIN LIGHT

Suppose he really saw the vision, God, the angel.
 My church owns the story: Joseph in the grove, fourteen,
 A supernatural sight of extraordinary beauty and significance
 While praying for a truth that had eluded others

My church owns the story: Joseph in the grove, fourteen
 Not unlike Joan, young Buddha, or Mohammed
 While praying for a truth that had eluded others
 From unusual encounter the gift more than surprising

Not unlike with John, young Buddha, or Mohammed
 It had to be believed, the unbelievable
 In unusual encounter, the gift more than surprising.
 Looking through binoculars the night I found the comet

It had to be believed, the unbelievable
 The meteor, the incandescent sparkler writing names by Pleiades
 Coming through binoculars the night I found the comet
 More than white on black that no one else could see

The meteor, the incandescent sparkler writing names by Pleiades
 Suppose he really saw the vision, God, the angel
 More than white on black that no one else could see
 A supernatural sight of extraordinary beauty and significance.

Both *pantoums* and the experience came home with me, changed me. The next night, Jean, a young naturalist who knew everything about the heavens as well as the earth, saw my "comet" on the beach, confirmed what I saw but knew no more than I about what it was. But that meant not nearly so much to me as that it still was there for me. And even that did not matter as much as simply having seen it once, known it to be there, felt the almost desperate need to be believed. Having not another soul to bear witness to my seeing that light on November 16 and encountering that need to be believed, granted me an empathy I might never have had for prophets and visionaries and people who see what I am unable to bring into my sights.

It was just a light in the sky, moving. Not a plane, not a falling star, nothing I have ever seen before. Probably not *the* comet. But it was there, real, unforgettable, a not-big light for a brilliant sky. Who knows how long it lasted? Long enough to let me think hard on shepherds and wise men and Joseph looking up to see what no one else might.

On 5 May 1986, six months later, during a quiet week in Sun Valley, Idaho, I reread my *pantoums* and discovered a third meditation on the heavens, a reason for my vision, a memory of a painting in Highland Park Ward where I had grown up.

THIRD MEDITATION: THE COMET IS REMEMBERING

Not until today this small comet in my scalp:
The clattering of memory: the painting
In the chapel of my childhood against the organ loft:
Joseph kneeling at the elevated feet of the Father and the Son.

The clattering of memory, the painting,
Backdrop to the hymns, the bishop, and the sacrament,
Joseph kneeling at the elevated feet of the Father and the Son.
Did the artist put it in — the vision — or did I?

Backdrop to the hymns, the bishop, and the sacrament,
My quarter-century there, it rose indigenous as music.
Did the artist put it in — the vision — or did I?
In the Sacred Grove, sun streaming on the boy at prayer.

My quarter century there, it rose indigenous as music,
More real now than Palmyra, where I occupied one grown-up Sunday
The Sacred Grove: Sun streaming on the boy at prayer
Indelible on knowing, like features of a mother giving milk.

More real now than the Sacred Grove I occupied one grown-up Sunday,
Not until today this small comet in my scalp:
Indelible on knowing, like the features of a mother giving milk:
In the chapel of my childhood against the organ loft: the vision.

The final comment came four months later on 28 September 1986, when I returned to Highland Park Ward for the first time in maybe twenty years. Not much had changed except the pulpit. It no longer stood above the choir and under the organ loft; designers had determined it needed to be closer to the congregation, in front of the choir seats, more visible to aging eyes, more imperative to children who might be far away.

Through the entire missionary farewell we were there to attend, I studied the Lee Greene Richards painting, still huge in the nave of my childhood church. Only the Sacred Grove was there, trees, sunlight, sky. No boy at prayer, no Father, Son. Had they ever been there? Had I really just forgotten? Had the painting been repainted? I didn't want to ask, or know.