

MARK JARMAN

The Excitement

My grandfather was given to believing
In ghosts beside the Holy Ghost. As a boy
He felt an invisible hand clap on his head
As a voice murmured, "You are in my power."
As a man he heard his mother's voice in the pulpit.
In some lights he could picture people's souls
As shrouds of fog or stray bits of apparel,
Shirttails poking out, secret banners waving.
He knew what faith could do, that hidden star
Imploded at the galaxy's black heart,
And he had faith. He wanted a technique.
He knew there was a way to make his faith
Devour its cosmic doubts and spit them back
As the moving mountains of both space and time.
Time led him on to death. And space confined him.
He thought—if he could only pull them apart
And not unweave himself. He believed his soul
Was safe, because it also hid within him,
Separate and pristine, a bead of meaning,
A seed in time and space which, once beyond them,
Would blossom in eternity, just waiting.
But let him move this saltshaker across the table.
If he could do that, simply with a thought,
What couldn't he do? What my grandfather wanted
Was mind enough to move things with a thought.
And he believed that faith was a technique,
But there had to be others. Jesus came
To tell him there were no others, and faith itself
Was not invented to move saltshakers.

But Jesus came to him. Who wouldn't want that?
Who wouldn't want to walk with him in a garden,
On a sunny day, in a cloister of fresh flowers?

He would make you feel special and would not flatter,
But speak about the world that you could make,
You would have the power to make, which he would give you.
No one could get enough of such a person.
Charisma (the heroin of personality)—
My grandfather wanted to have that, too:
To be the one the young monks flocked behind,
Quacking their questions, and to stop every so often
To answer them like a cloud across the sun—
Not ominous but with refreshing coolness.
Gandhi, it is said, took walks like that.
One entered in the flow of his current interests,
In honey bees, or salt recovery, or spinning wheels.
Who wouldn't want in the cool of the day to walk
With one who knew everything about you,
More even than you knew? That was the secret.
The faith that walked on water was a power
My grandfather wanted, with its homely gifts
For treating time and space like salt and pepper.
A dash of either and the real was changed
Into the spicy soup of the unreal.
To taste that, and to make that simply happen.

And doesn't it matter to want something better
And not a raise or more job self-esteem,
But something on a plane so rarefied
You lived there like a migrant hummingbird
Or monarch butterfly, crossing the Gulf,
Going north or south and feeding on the sugar
Of ecstasy, existing in that wingbeat,
The sky, the expanse of water, no land in sight?
To put his hand through air into the future,
And heal the dying child. To reach back with ten fingers
And raise the loved one, waiting in the grave.
Because he knew that Christ had done these things,
My grandfather wanted to do them, too.
He wanted to leave his mark on the eternal,
To manipulate the supernatural stuff
That he was sure was everywhere, like the airwaves.
And on the radio he threw his voice
Against the willing air that rippled with it.

He called himself the Shepherd of the Air
 And gathered his flock of insubstantial strays
 From the antennas of Los Angeles.

I've told you this so you can know this man,
 My grandfather, a little, as I tell my story,
 The only real ghost story I know,
 A holy ghost story, complete with blood and terror,
 For it unfolds at night, and someone or something
 Risen from the dead plays a crucial role
 At scaring the living Jesus out of somebody.
 It may be Jesus himself who did the scaring.

It was a dry and cool November evening.
 Los Angeles collected all its lights,
 Some still, some strung on moving threads,
 Into its basin beside the ocean's darkness.
 This was the vastness where my grandfather worked,
 Alone in his church office, recording a sermon
 On tape, and playing it back, and hearing himself
 Explain the spiritual power of some new thing,
 Some drug or diet or mental exercise
 That had excited him. The ghost was coming,
 The first he'd ever seen, after years of wishing
 That he could see them everywhere.
 Hypnotist, Metaphysician, Parapsychologist,
 Quester in the Dreamworld, Channeler,
 These were roles he played or he pretended.
 And now a real ghost, torn from the cosmos,
 Was coming to his office to address him.
 There was a step, ringing on the stairwell,
 Although my grandfather couldn't hear it,
 Or hear the doorknob turn, the presence enter,
 For he was listening to himself quote scripture,
 "Behold, I stand at the door and knock." Red letters
 His voice turned into living words, like song.
 Then, out of the tangled mesh of chapter and verse,
 The blood of Jesus' speech on the filmy page
 Spilled suddenly across the carpeted floor.
 My grandfather looked up and saw the man,
 And not as in his Bible recitations.

Bleeding, yes, but dressed in business clothes.
In fact, dressed as he was in business clothes,
About my grandfather's height, about his size,
Bald with a little silver hair combed sideways,
And wearing horn-rimmed glasses, lips parted
To speak. The ghost had on the same white shirt.
And both wore ties, the same tie, with the same knot.
But Grandfather couldn't see these things for the blood,
The blood coming from the hands and feet—
Bare feet in a business suit, with familiar hands,
And the blood from the famous wounds printing the carpet
And spreading over the things on the glass-topped desk.
The bleeding man in the dark suit looked familiar.
And his voice, too, sounded strange in the same way
Grandfather's voice did when he played it back.
But the question that he asked as he stood there bleeding
Was not one Grandfather ever asked himself:
"Why are you wasting your time on all this nonsense?"
He saw a soul wounded by his existence
And told the world and us it was Jesus Christ.

The years into old age and death were set then.
And I have often thought about those years.
For this was the peak moment in family history,
The Lord come unto Granddad to rebuke him
And all the supernatural confirmed.
For he did not turn away from his desires,
But took a new way, or an old way he'd forgotten.
Life with the Holy Spirit, as he called it,
Led him to crowds as he had never known them,
The leaning forward masses who could see
Something peculiar that they wanted, too,
Bathing the old man in its thrilling spotlight.
Even as his body gave up its powers—
Abandoning a right hand's cunning, breaking a hip,
And draining from the corner of his mouth—
Wheeled into the presence of believers,
He basked in their true love and stuck by his story.
They led him a merry dance until he died.

The Football Dream

One of my fellow linemen will appear,
Fred or Pat, the pulling guard or the tight end,
A teenager, waiting for me to suit up—
A teenager, and I will be my age now as I dream.

Bodies will crowd us. I won't be able to ask
How he's doing or say what I know will happen.
And I won't remember my locker combination,
I'll forget my shoes, and we will go to play

In the highway near my house, or up on the roof,
Or in the corridor where I teach now.
And among fit, hulking youngsters, I will console myself
That I know more now, and will make that agility count.

Then, set in the shadowy line, I will face
My opponent. And the dream will break off.
Every fall for thirty-two years now, every fall
This trial returns and convicts me of growing older.