The Light Bucket

Ethan C. Grant
Valparaiso University, Ethan.Grant@valpo.edu

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“Bradford and I had out the telescope.
We spread our two legs as we spread its three,
Pointed our thoughts the way we pointed it,
And standing at our leisure till the day broke,
Said some of the best things we ever said.”
—Robert Frost, “The Star-Splitter”

There is something to be said for the eclipse,
the sky the night of February twentieth,
a school night nevertheless spent
late at the eye of a telescope, a gift
from Darren’s teacher, propped up
by the back porch steps, pointing up
some thirty-five degrees of southeast,
its aperture wide, trained on the sky
behind the shed, the shadows of the moon.
It was called a light bucket, scooping up
hunggrily the colors of the cosmos, condensing
the galaxy into a single golden beam.

In his hunger, Galileo had gone blind
staring at the sun. Carl Sagan, when young,
was blinded by the Brooklyn lights
nightly washing out his swath of sky.
So New Market was our Florence,
our New York, Darren’s backyard
our terrazza all’aperto by starlight.
Small towns sleep early, and in such
magnificent desolation we watched—
past the antennas and power-lines
and the steam wafting off rooftops
and snow-covered cornfields—something
new to our world, something beyond
our lives, beyond even the bronze shadows
scorching and shading the white face
stamped in weak stars. We wore gloves
that night, but our fingers felt frozen.
Our breath rose up in vaporous ghosts
and Darren’s glasses were glazed with fog
when the light bucket swallowed the moon.
Carl Sagan knew the music of the spheres. Galileo first heard the songs, learned the art, and gave his sight to see the stars. If life were somehow more like art, I think my life would have ended a thousand times over. Or not really ended, but abandoned, left off at moments of supreme affirmation, like a film, fading slowly into black. And I would still be out there with Darren, in the cold and dark, peering through a mechanical eye, in quiet reverence of the sky, of the void and its silence, shivering, freezing, all the while thinking how warm we could be to leave the cold for the kitchen, but staying all the same, content with the night, with the numbness, and the bite of an icy metal tube pointed propitiously skyward at the shape passing into white penumbra, not sinking, not really rising, but biding with us, hung in stasis in the roving, airy spaces over all the quiet housetops slipping silently into shadow like stars setting in the night, like another end to another life.