

Ned Balbo

Live from the Dakota

December 8, 1980

Through noise and smoke-haze drowning the TV
above the bar, your photograph flashed on
that Monday night close to semester's end
as if you'd joined the dead, closed captions still
unheard of as I glanced up at the screen.
Some file shot—outmoded mop-top, grin—
What were you up to now? But then the years—
your birth and death—appeared. I stood there, stunned,
proved wrong, but brought the brimming pitcher back to
friends for whom you held no special place—
Could that be true? It was. Still, they were kind
enough to hear me out, surprised as well.
What did I feel? The whirl of punk and disco
winding down had dropped me at the brink
of some new age I'd welcome or resist
to no avail, while you, five years retired,
were someone that I'd learned to live without.
Back briefly, twice as old, you were gunned down
before I'd yet forgiven you for leaving.
And who was I, exactly?

*Poured beer banked
off empty glasses, Donna Summer mourned
a cake left under storm-clouds, while the Stones,
savvy survivors, vowed that they'd refuse
the role of burdened beast beneath the beat . . .*

Back in my room, my girlfriend flipped through *Time*.
A record spun. I watched, blurred spectrum swirling as the
stylus fell, calling your voice—
loss-haunted, lasting—back into the world.

Major Tom and David Bowman

After David Bowie's "Space Oddity" and
Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*

What's the "oddity"
in David Bowie's song
about the astronaut
we know as Major Tom?
There's none: it's just a pun
on Kubrick's *Odyssey*,
inspired by the shot
of Frank Poole cast adrift,
unspooling into space
past any hope of rescue
from unending darkness,
betrayed by a computer's
dark intelligence.

So, too, will David Bowman
meet the same misfortune
unless the only voice
besides his own is silenced,
the vital key in hand,
each cartridge he removes
erasing memory,
regressing sentience
into a few short lines
of *Daisy, answer do*
eerily winding down.

But Major Tom, alone,

sounds unafraid, it's true.
The world below him spins
away his one last chance
to join its gravity—
Too late. The wife he loves
will never see him land.
His circuit dead, he's tensed,
prepared to make a choice.
Propelled from Earth and Sun
without much oxygen,
what does he feel—defiance?
Ground Control's intruders
matter less and less;
the earth below, still blue,
cloud-streaked, is now a place
he's permanently left,
this "tin can" all he's got
in all the galaxy
—But now that Earth is gone
for good, the steady hum
of static drowns all thought
of turning back, what's wrong
or right resolved: *I'm free.*

Glory-of-the-Seas

This cone shell, *Conus Gloria-maris* Chemnitz, 4-5 in. long, is considered the most valuable shell in the world.—*Sea Shells of the World*, Golden Press, 1962 edition

Once considered a great rarity, the Glory-of-the-Seas was a much sought-after cone and thought to be the most valuable shell in the world.— *Sea Shells of the World*, Golden Press, 1985 edition

Glory-of-the-Seas, your name alone
would flourish still without your graceful whorls
and surface finely etched, exquisite cone
shell tenantless, more fabulous than pearls.

Better, you'd have brought in twelve hundred bucks
in '60s dollars if I'd found you beached
upon Long Island shores, emerged from flecks
of foam retreating swiftly. If I'd touched

you then, a boy, and held you in my palm,
fine gold thread-patterns mesmerizing me,
I'd have felt chosen, thrilled yet strangely calm,
destined for anything. How large the sea

that held you I could not conceive . . . You lost
your luster in that decade's final year
when scuba divers swimming deeper, deepest,
found your habitat, unknown frontier

where, cast off, you lay numberless . . .

Today,

I know the Philippines is far away,
the market's flooded, glory is no more,
and rare shells don't just wash up on the shore.

On Trial for an Imaginary Murder

The accusation, strangely, is the proof.
The judge, secure on high, looks unforgiving.
No one takes an oath on your behalf,
sworn to the truth. You feel like an engraving,

powerless to move . . . Who was the victim?
No one says. You're told the prosecution
will defend you, too, since it saves time.
No jury files in for his presentation

of the facts, since no one disagrees.
Will someone raise his voice so you can hear
the case against you? Or the verdict? Freeze
that fraught split second filling you with fear

before you're called? The fan spins overhead—
All eyes are rapt. A bailiff locks the door
and glares. He knows exactly what you did,
and, yes, the evidence will soon assure

your swift conviction in the first degree . . .
But who is that behind you, looking on?
—The murder victim, waiting patiently,
alive and smiling, satisfied he's won.