

Will Wells

Sabbath Candles

As Shabbos candles shrink, flames climb higher
on ever-longer wicks, like wakes that raft
the flotsam of our acts. They rise, quiver
or sink, responsive both to breath and drafts
that circulate within the house, unseen.
First lit as evening falls, their flickering
and flares enact the human struggle between
despair and hope, that balanced bickering.

Hanukkah, Diwali, or midnight mass
on Christmas Eve, our urge to light the dark
confesses fundamental loneliness.
And melting tallow mimes our mortal work.
Hear us, O Lord, whatever you may be,
and guide our fading to eternity.

Marchons, marchons

The mist at the close of *Casablanca* marked the morph from character to myth. The haze of teargas over Court Street when I blundered from the midnight feature shocked me back to fact. I flinched at crackling plate-glass underfoot. *Put your hands above your heads and walk single file this way*, a bullhorn voice demanded. Helmeted riot police lined one corner, a ragged snarl of protestors the next, with classic movie buffs between. *Move to our lines or you will be arrested*, the voice insisted, although my lodgings lay the other way. When a companion turned to urge the crowd to leave, like Rick to Ilsa, a volley of rubber bullets knocked him flat. Though earlier, inside, I'd stood to sing *La Marseillaise*, I bowed my head, shuffled up for patting down and took the long way home.

Moonwalker

I.

My folks asleep, I skulked out late and sulked
while “our hometown hero” touched safely down
then bounced on the moon like a circus clown.
Through hick town wastes with my own small steps, I walked
in Wapakoneta, shackled at the heel
by gravity’s adamant grip. That was enough
to goad my surly quips. *I would not kneel
to Armstrong’s dusty deeds. Stuff the ‘right stuff’!*

Each quarter hour, the courthouse clock would chime
though all four faces declared a different time —
portals, perhaps, to somewhere I could claim.
I cursed my luck and kicked up roadside gravel.
Combustible words supplied my rocket fuel.
But where could I go? What space could I fill?

II.

But where could I go? What space could I fill?
Escape velocity could be achieved
one foot at a time, if only I believed.
I strode and chanted rambling doggerel
about small minds and towns I’d overcome.
Moonlight flushed me like a bully’s taunt.
*What made me think I would ever amount
to much? Why grudge another’s well-won fame?*

Oncoming headlights interrogated me.
Where are you headed? What are you looking for?
Destined to doubt, I doubted destiny
and blundered past indifferent mobs of corn.
Though I loomed up like a truant scarecrow,
I was moonwalker too, cloaked in its glow.

III.

I was moonwalker too, cloaked in its glow.
The flight path of my dusty tennis shoes
bypassed Tranquility since I had none to lose.
A sense of falling short began to grow.
I could not shake it, no matter how I tried.
Teenaged angst was part of what I bore,
but, also, something else, and something more.
Call it a calling to be dissatisfied.

The moon remains a metaphor for what
cannot be attained. I still prowl under it,
pursuing awe within the awkward fit
of words. The sins Armstrong did not commit
I now forgive. We sought a common end —
caged in time's cramped space, hoping to transcend.