

Laughing at Li Po's Cat

Before my bed
there is bright moonlight
so that it seems like frost on the ground.
Li Po Quiet Night Thoughts Tang Dynasty

1.

You are busy today tossing vowels in the air
as though you could catch them again in your smile
and your smile was a sort of cradle.

But you are also ready to laugh at the moon
tipped towards yourself in a cup of milk -
if you tip it too far you could make a new galaxy
rearranging the constellations with your fingers.

And tonight you will wake your mother at 4am to look at the Dog Star,
just the two of you like haiku poets or Chinese scholars -
the night sky a diagram you can already read.

Now you are both awake enough to hear the neighbour's cat come in
and you tell her that he is studying astronomy too,
you have heard him reading Li Po's poem aloud
and beating time with his tail.

Your sleepy Mama just yawns and smiles
but you have seen him shake off the dust of a long dead star from his paws
before cleaning his whiskers
and you know that he longs to swallow Sirius too.

Meanwhile this month you have grown another inch
and clap your hands as though to catch the very moment you grew -
finger to finger, palm to palm
in an ancient gesture you just invented.

2.

Today you have seen yourself reflected in Daddy's eye
and he tells you that the word for pupil
comes from the Greek word pupa or doll -
the little doll seen in another's eye.

You nod - serious now, at the smaller you
inside the smaller self and on and on in tinier increments
down to an atom mirrored back at itself
and you nod at that self too.

When you are bigger your Daddy will show you a pupa of a different sort -
the chrysalis of a Monarch he is hatching in a shoebox
as he remembers that a butterfly once chose you over any other,
setting down for a rest on your nose and delighted, you laughed.

You will smile at him and nod
watching his clever mouth mosaic the words:
Swallowtail, Fritillary, Yellow Admiral, Tortoiseshell...
Perhaps you will grow up to study butterflies.

And perhaps you will plant a garden entirely with Milkweed
calling the Monarchs out of the air and your Daddy too
to await their arrival as he once waited for yours -
not quite grasping the gifts you would bring.

* The Monarch Butterfly *Danaus plexippus* was named for King William III Prince of Orange