

OF STARS AND MEN

Daniel J. Langton

Man is made of ordinary star-stuff.

—Harlow Shapley

*aus wie ein Stern: denn da ist keine Stelle,
die dich nicht sieht. Du musst dein Leben aendern.*

—Rainer Maria Rilke

At first there was no night, nor any day,
No wind, no calm, no solid land, no sea;
Nothing but chaos in an aimless sway.
This is the way it was, Infinity—
A null where nothing stirred to live or die,
Nor were there any signs to prophesy
A change would come. Then from some spark, some blow,
Some screaming wrench, a heat began to grow
Inside that mass, the black to turn to blue,
The blue to orange, the matted core to glow
With all the perfect flames that blaze in you.

The cover of the shape withdrew, a space of gray
Bold solid stuff fanned out as though just free
From bands. The chunks whizzed out in every way,
They spun in what might pass for jubilee
If jubilee were part of this most dry
And timeless state. Some pieces went awry
And crashed and broke, others began to slow
To take their place in circling high or low
About their light. The earth, a hot thin stew,
Whipped into line, seething within its row
With all the perfect flames that blaze in you.
A crust began to form of livid clay,
The earth to take its wrinkled shape, to be
Itself, to feel and then in course obey
The laws that weaved its web, laws that decree

With unbent force the blend of sand and sky.
Warm mist arose, fat clouds began to lie
In dripping mounds above the land, to grow
And swell until they burst, until their flow
Had filled the sea and every hidden slough
Where first that barely moving thing might show
With all the perfect flames that blaze in you.

The sea was all life's womb; in every bay
The stones grew warts of splitting cells, algae
Greened the tides, thrived on their own decay,
Turned on themselves, crazy, drunk on a spree,
Tossing new forms toward the surface sky
That held upon its head the sun's warm eye.
Then life took heart, grew lungs to leave that flow,
To live on searing rocks and sunless snow.
It crawled, it ran, it slid, it even flew,
And linked the pulsing nations from below
With all the perfect flames that blaze in you.
Man was the king of earth, no limb could stay
His weaponed hand, each wish was a decree.
Yet now and then the hunter was the prey
Of night-born winds that waved the mind's high sea.
So men built walls and grouped themselves, to try
To calm their dreams. They shaped a compound lie
Instead, a lie that swore they could outgrow
All niggling fears. First they must overthrow
The balanced chain, and then they must subdue
The million kinds of things that subtly glow
With all the perfect flames that blaze in you.

Now it can end, this time the wreckers know
Just how to reap the harvest that they sow.
Yet earth will live, and men will live here too,
With all the grace that courage can bestow,
With all the perfect flames that blaze in you.