

September 15, 1993 (Vol. 9, no. 2)

Dear Colleague:

Sit Jessica. Look how the floor of heaven  
Is thick inlaid with patines of gold;  
There's not the smallest orb which thou behold'st  
But in his motion like an angel sings,  
Still quiring to the young-ey'd cherubims:  
Such harmony is in immortal souls;  
But, whilst this muddy vesture of decay  
Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it.

(The Merchant of Venice, Act V, scene 1)

I can imagine young Lorenzo sitting next to Jessica on an evening flight from New York to San Francisco. They have just had dinner and are holding hands when Lorenzo glances out of the window, notices the glittering lights over the Midwest, and says, "Look how the floor of earth is thick inlaid with patines of gold!" The point is, young people nowadays are more likely to look down than up. They no longer consider the sky, the stars, a part of nature. Nature, for them, has shrunk to the earth's biosphere. The spotted eagle and bluegrass are pretty much what they have in mind when they think of nature, and adaptation to it means adapting to the earth's ecological system. But in Shakespeare's time, adaptation was something far grander, no less than seeking harmony between the celestial orbs above and the individual's immortal soul temporarily trapped in a "muddy vesture" here below.

Today, in any case, what's the point of looking up at the evening sky? More likely than not, the stars are wiped out by the glow of city lights. Can you really say that you miss the stars? Here is W. H. Auden's honest reply. He says that the stars are ok, but they are completely indifferent to us. "If equal affection cannot be, / Let the more loving one be me." Yes, but we all know how unrequited love can turn sour.

Admirer as I think I am  
Of stars that do not give a damn,  
I cannot, now I see them, say  
I missed one terribly all day.

Were all stars to disappear or die,  
I should learn to look at an empty sky  
And feel its total dark sublime,  
Though this might take me a little time.

Best wishes,

*Ji-Ju*