**On the Medusa of Leonardo Da Vinci in the Florentine Gallery**

It lieth, gazing on the midnight sky,

Upon the cloudy mountain-peak supine;

Below, far lands are seen tremblingly;

Its horror and its beauty are divine.

Upon its lips and eyelids seems to lie

Loveliness like a shadow, from which shine,

Fiery and lurid, struggling underneath,

The agonies of anguish and of death.

Yet it is less the horror than the grace

Which turns the gazer’s spirit into stone,

Whereon the lineaments of that dead face

   Are graven, till the characters be grown

Into itself, and thought no more can trace;

’Tis the melodious hue of beauty thrown

Athwart the darkness and the glare of pain,

Which humanize and harmonize the strain.

And from its head as from one body grow,

   As [river-] grass out of a watery rock,

Hairs which are vipers, and they curl and flow

And their long tangles in each other lock,

And with unending involutions show

   Their mailèd radiance, as it were to mock

The torture and the death within, and saw

The solid air with many a raggèd jaw.

And, from a stone beside, a poisonous eft

   Peeps idly into those Gorgonian eyes;

Whilst in the air a ghastly bat, bereft

   Of sense, has flitted with a mad surprise

Out of the cave this hideous light had cleft,

   And he comes hastening like a moth that hies

After a taper; and the midnight sky

Flares, a light more dread than obscurity.

’Tis the tempestuous loveliness of terror;

   For from the serpents gleams a brazen glare

Kindled by that inextricable error,

   Which makes a thrilling vapour of the air

Become a [dim] and ever-shifting mirror

Of all the beauty and the terror there –

A woman’s countenance, with serpent-locks,

Gazing in death on Heaven from those wet rocks.

– Percy Bysshe Shelley

**Rhyme for a Child Viewing a Naked Venus in a Painting of ‘The Judgement of Paris’**

He gazed and gazed and gazed and gazed,

Amazed, amazed, amazed, amazed.

– Robert Browning

**Archaic Torso of Apollo**

We never knew his stupendous head

in which the eye-apples ripened. But

his torso still glows, like a lamp,

in which his gaze, screwed back to low,

holds steady and gleams. Otherwise the curve

of his chest couldn’t dazzle you, nor a smile

run through the slight twist of the loins

toward the center that held procreation.

Otherwise this stone would stand mutilated and too short

below the translucent fall-off of the shoulders,

and wouldn’t shimmer like a predator’s fur;

nor shine out past all the edges

like a star: for in it is no place

that doesn’t see you. You must change your life.

– Rainer Maria Rilke *(translated by Galway Kinnell)*

**Musée des Beaux Arts**

About suffering they were never wrong,

The old Masters: how well they understood

Its human position: how it takes place

While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along;

How, when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting

For the miraculous birth, there always must be

Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating

On a pond at the edge of the wood:

They never forgot

That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course

Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot

Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer’s horse

Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.

In Breughel’s *Icarus*, for instance: how everything turns away

Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may

Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,

But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone

As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green

Water, and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen

Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,

Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.

– W. H. Auden

**Having a Coke with You**

is even more fun than going to San Sebastian, Irún, Hendaye, Biarritz, Bayonne

or being sick to my stomach on the Travesera de Gracia in Barcelona

partly because in your orange shirt you look like a better happier St. Sebastian

partly because of my love for you, partly because of your love for yoghurt

partly because of the fluorescent orange tulips around the birches

partly because of the secrecy our smiles take on before people and statuary

it is hard to believe when I’m with you that there can be anything as still

as solemn as unpleasantly definitive as statuary when right in front of it

in the warm New York 4 o’clock light we are drifting back and forth

between each other like a tree breathing through its spectacles

and the portrait show seems to have no faces in it at all, just paint

you suddenly wonder why in the world anyone ever did them

I look at you

and I would rather look at you than all the portraits in the world

except possibly for the *Polish Rider* occasionally and anyway it’s in the Frick

which thank heavens you haven’t gone to yet so we can go together the first time

and the fact that you move so beautifully more or less takes care of Futurism

just as at home I never think of the *Nude Descending a Staircase* or

at a rehearsal a single drawing of Leonardo or Michelangelo that used to wow me

and what good does all the research of the Impressionists do them

when they never got the right person to stand near the tree when the sun sank

or for that matter Marino Marini when he didn’t pick the rider as carefully

as the horse

it seems they were all cheated of some marvelous experience

which is not going to go wasted on me which is why I am telling you about it

– Frank O’Hara