

Ruth Padel

Letter To A Portugese Cosmologist

The Universe has no doors and no edges. There is nothing stopping us from seeing what is going on in any direction except the cosmological horizon.

– Pedro Ferreira, *The State of the Universe*

You talk of Godel, truths that can't be proved,
the surface-of-last-scatter
origins of light. You pit tokens of dark matter,
 shrinking us, against a mysterious safety
 pushing everything further apart,
 but don't know how to answer where you're from.
You look for things that do not shine,
mathematics of connectedness
in what the rest of us see as spotted lacquer.

Then add in Africa
where your grandfathers were born.
Shanty-towns, streetcorner Kwaito music,
 glottal grammar
 of too-quick-to-follow
 Xhosa chat shows, acacia tines
on sulphurous horizons,
surnames you recognize from Portugal
on fading turquoise petrol-station signs.

*We don't know, you say, how the first stars
were born. If the universe wraps round itself
we should see tapestries of repeating lights,
 distant copies of ourselves, our galaxy
 and neighbours, as they were in the past.*
I'm at the kitchen table, moon above my head
and night, pretending to be naked,
is flaunting her dark energy.

All that pushing apart!
We close our prayers, most inward when
most looking out, on open numbers, three, five,
seven, nine. We come home to ourselves
 following a silver-paper-trail
 among elliptic nebulae, light-paths
 through strings of misalignment,
rough space that's never empty.
Fire at the synagogue.
The hot dense core of stars.