

August 1999: Light is a measure of time

Scientists have found the oldest
point in the universe: a galaxy filled
with new stars and all day long
I've been thinking about my mother.
How long it has been since
the nun came to fetch me from class
so I could wait for my brother to take me home,
even though I was in trouble
for using *CliffsNotes* in my Macbeth paper.
I practiced driving on the way,
Jack tossed the keys to me, figuring, perhaps,
concentration would hold us together.
All of us kids orbited around
her bed. I drove pretty good, I said
and she told me, "That's nice, honey,
now go get something to eat."

This new galaxy, the paper says,
looks young to scientists because
the deeper they look back in space,
the further they look back in time.
When I look back, I see her
bald as a nestling,
not silver-haired and regal, not the young
woman with the finger-waved Marcel who smiles
from the photo on the mantel.

This new galaxy may look as it was
a few billion years after the Big Bang
so scientists are trying to see how worlds form,
how we coalesce from the sea of light elements.
My father and mother met reaching
for a piece of banana cream pie
at the cafeteria of the Edgewater
Laundry where they worked.

Along with the Hubble, astronomers use
a spectrograph and computers to separate
overlapping images and uncover the distant galaxy.
One day she'd wear blue shoes, the next,
the pumps were black so she'd call from her closet,
asking would I be a good girl and transfer
things to her matching pocketbook.
I'd put in her wallet, the chintzy eyeglass and cigarette
cases, the lipstick worn to a parabola,
only tobacco bits, bobby pins,
or a sticky red pill left in the lining.

This oldest galaxy is called Sharon,
after the sister of one of the astronomers.
My mother and I have the same middle name: Marie.
Through the myopic lens of memory, I see mother,
the shopping bag of library books at her feet.
She glances up from the pages to watch with me
Laugh-In, *Burke's Law*, or *Man from U.N.C.L.E.*
those waves still lingering somewhere perhaps.

It is not often I consider the heavens,
physics, or universal truths
but today it consoled me to think time never breaks
nor does light stop, but continues.

