

Partly Heliotropic

by George Burns

Partly heliotropic, I'm grateful
to Socrates and Diogenes.
All those who briefly stood
with whatever lantern or stub of candle on hand
through the generations like fireflies
blossoming in a field
before falling into their darkness.

Naked in the marketplace,
shivering in a freezer,
locked in a hole in Walla Walla,
tucked under an arm,
face bashed, nose broke.

The man my mother chose for her destruction,
who beat me until I showed some sign of surrender,
the ex-con locked in a closet as a boy
and as a man robbed a Safeway then
locked the grocers in the freezer,

asked me once in our kitchen in Holly Park,
the beer bottle in his hand stabbing at the air:
Who's the smartest man in the whole world?

I shrugged. Nobody I knew.
Then he and his ex-con friend argued:
Socrates. Diogenes.
Both having some appeal
to men who had been kept in cages.

Socrates: People think they're smart, but they're not.
Diogenes: Carried a lantern looking for an honest man,
spent most of his life naked.

I don't know who won the argument.
But after I left home, joined the Army,
I saw Socrates' name
on a paperback book in the PX.
I had to give it a try.

Back in the barracks in the top bunk
I cried as the turning pages led me out
from the darkness of caves up to the sun.
So many shadows: my mother and Red,
me and my sister, flickering on a stone wall.

I'm surprised at how often - and suddenly -

I find myself a shadow again
like reluctant wallpaper
trying to unpeel myself
from one more wall.

I forget. Then remember:
caves, then sun, all the
dreamy ways I've used
to come back up.

A mother in a dark bedroom
seeing some good in some lost man,
pulling him into her
to save him, to save her,
for a moment, incandescence,
then the darkness
and our shadows flickering
on a stone wall.

Robinson Jeffers Tor House Prize for Poetry