

## NARRATIVES

*"Narratives are one sort of trace we leave on the world."*

—Gary Snyder

BRIAN SWANN

"Stand in front. Here, hold my bag." She reaches  
under her skirt. Digs a hole  
with her heel in the gravel of the taurobolium.  
Buries it. "Joining all the blood down here,"  
she says.

Upstairs, on the way out,  
she rinses her fingers in the basin by San Clemente's  
great doors. "They were all over the city," I say.  
"Churches were built over them."  
"Tertullian says Mithras was invented  
by the Devil to mock Christ." "More like  
the other way round." "That's history for you.  
One big *puticolo*."

By the time we get  
to the Largo Argentina for a 64 bus  
the sun is overhead. Where Caesar  
was stabbed in Temple C a cat is licking himself.  
"Do you think that's where we get the word 'understand'?"  
she says. "You stood—" "Not you. Men only."  
"You stood-under the grill and the blood of the stabbed bull  
poured over you and you under-stood. Immediate,  
unmediated transformation.

No blood of the lamb there." "It's certainly something  
you'd remember." "All I remember from  
last night is too much Frascati, three  
young nuns dancing, and we were in love." "Still are."  
The bus comes at us like a chariot out of the sun.

On board I say, "Remember Rtiis  
in the chariot leaning down and saying to Mithras:

‘Step up closer. Bend down?’ “I do.” “And as he does so  
his loose Mede trousers ride up. Rti embraces him  
and says, ‘You have such handsome calves.’” “They marry.”  
It’s the wrong bus but somehow we still arrive  
at the Vatican. “It says here St. Peter’s  
was built over a cave.” “Mithras,” I say.  
“He was everywhere.” “This place is too big and too much.  
It tries too hard.” “Somebody said  
It would make a great bronchitis hospital for those  
with delicate lungs and delicate fantasies.”  
“I prefer the solar bull to the pale  
Galilean,” she says. “The world has grown gray from  
his breath.”

We get another wrong bus and walk  
back home through the Campo de’ Fiori. She  
pats the base of Giordano Bruno’s  
statue, where he burned.

That night, on our balcony  
in the ghetto, we stand looking up over the city’s  
lights at the sky’s coronal loops, the power  
of each part of sunlight. “All those stories  
in the sky. Who’s your favorite?” she asks. “You mean  
the magnetic field of the sun’s fusion,  
the pure force of the Milky Way, the inner  
necessities of the Virgo Clusters? Do you know  
that ‘myth’ and ‘mouth’ are related?”

I say. “It makes sense,” she says, “but I’m  
not sure I like your latest story.” “It’s not mine.

And it’s not really a story. It’s science.”

“How can you tell science it’s got nice calves?” “You can’t.  
And who would want to anyway? There’d be  
no point. It wouldn’t understand.”