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Paula M. Cogan

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When Flat Becomes Round & Perspective Shoes

Paula M. Cogan

Author's Note: The following two poems were written with the study abroad experience in mind, trying to capture that shift students' worldviews can take when they are exposed to a wide range of both differences and similarities in the many phases of life, all over the world. However, as I reconsidered them, I realized that they can reflect many student experiences - orientation, that first day in the residence halls, Philosophy 101 - coming together with all sorts of people and ideas they may have never experienced before.

In that spirit, think about the moment when the conceptual tide shifted in someone who had always taken our Earth to be flat and then discovered that it was round. Imagine how profound that must have been. At many times, I think perspective shifting is as profound and scary and joyful for our students as it must have been back then, and its power can help lead us closer to our students and often, back to ourselves.

When Flat Becomes Round

When flat becomes round
there is no going back.
Think of the fear of falling off.
Gripping, really.
Even if you can't see the edge,
you somehow know it's there,
peering, peering, peering at you.
So you move one forward, two back on your ground circle
tethered to the edges believing its truth because it mirrors a sphere.
Then you leap off and think,
maybe not.

When flat becomes round
there is no going back.
Think of the fear of flying off.
Gripping, really.
Goodbye and hello, never knew you were there.
Never knew you had a circle and a sun - a moon, too.
Never knew we were all under there, out there, around there,
amidst there.
Here, day may hold night
and even early afternoon,
the sun setting gently on that ice patch, melting it
and it flows around the edge,
not off, you see.
Around for you and through for me and
it's still liquid that once was ice.

When flat becomes round
you really can't go back,
though at times it feels like the thing to do.
What world is this I've entered?
Why am I here and where's the door?

Paula M. Cogan graduated from State University of New York at Geneseo with a bachelor's degree in English, following which she worked in secondary education and retail management in Massachusetts before finding her way to Endicott College. There, she worked as a Residence Director as well as acting co-leader of the Mexico Volunteer Internship Project through study abroad. At UVM, Paula was the Housing, Marketing and Assessment Assistant in the Department of Residential Life, and served as the Editor of The Vermont Connection. Her practica experiences were in the Office of the Provost, Study Abroad at St. Michael's College, and Study Abroad at Middlebury College. Currently, Paula is an Assistant Director of Admissions at Bucknell University in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania.

I want the water to be ice like the last time I opened the freezer,
but I still can't find the door, not even the freezer's
and you're all staring at me, waiting for my response,
and I'm stumbling for a door that
no longer exists.

I can't hear what you're saying,
my ears near your mouth,
so I listen with my eyes, my mind.
My mind strains, losing,
then lets go and hears.

When flat becomes round
you can't see back there.
The substance of it, yes.
Ways to describe it -
broad, full, thin, lacking.
But the weight of a glance
won't do the way it did,
can't tell every story anymore.
So you blink slowly, deliberately
letting your eyes embrace light,
swim in light,
hear light,
and revel in dark between.
There, water trickles over your toes,
flows over your feet,
waves through you
with wet intentions ice never imagined.
Your ears see and your eyes hear
in that moment, that place,
that space when flat becomes just that,
and round rolls in.

Perspective Shoes

Step to the edge.
Did you know that worlds will not disappear?
Pause there.
Inhale.
Again, please.
Take your cerebral pause
but then lay right down on your belly
and let your head peer over,
trust your body falling in,
and out of that pause you took
feel the soft middle of humanity
under, around, through.
It's not going to be simple.
It won't ever be simple.
Her shoes may have thicker soles
than you like and she may
appear to walk sideways,
but ask her if you can try them on.
Go on now.
Move past pausing.
Try them on.