# Conjunction

# John Updike

Geoffrey Parrish, approaching sixty, had long enjoyed an uneasy relationship with the stars. In childhood, when we assume the world to have been elaborately arrayed for our own benefit, with a virtual eternity allowed for inspection of its many large and mysterious parts, he had taken the stars, like the clouds overhead, for granted. His mother knew the Big Dipper, and Orion, and on a summer evening might point out, in a voice of unaccountable excitement, Venus—a white shining puncture in the blue that was deepening above the gory sunset. For a moment or two at night, he might become aware, as a skater is suddenly aware of the dark water he skims across, of the speckled heavens, a dust of distant worlds, between the massy silhouettes of the black treetops. But in his back yard, where such revelations would find him, he was generally intent upon catching fireflies or feeling the throb of his breath and heartbeat as he ran, late for his bedtime, toward the tall lit windows of the house.

*Wynken, Blynken, and Nod*, illustrated by Vernon Grant, had been one of the big thin books, smelling like the oilcloth on the kitchen table, that his mother would read to him at bedtime, and somehow it seemed to be taking place among the stars:

*The little stars were the herring fish*

*That lived in that beautiful sea.…*

The image upset him, conveying a seethe of activity that went on without him, all night:

*All night long their nets they threw*

*To the stars in the twinkling foam.…*

Wynken and Blynken turned out to be his, the listener’s, two little eyes, and Nod his little head. It was a hideous thought, like two eggs and a cabbage bouncing around in this glimmering soup, and in merciful escape from the unthinkable he let himself be lulled by his mother’s enclosing voice as it read aloud, in a grave voice sweetened by the approach of the end:

*So shut your eyes while mother sings*

*Of wonderful sights that be*,

*And you shall see the beautiful things*

*As you rock in the misty sea.…*

High school and college brought him word of what the stars really were, how senselessly large and distant and numerous, but such intellectual shocks were cushioned by the distractions of co-education—the female bodies with their supple heft, their powdered and perfumed auras, their fuzzy sweaters and silken blouses, and the glimpses, at the edges, of elastic underwear. Why do girls wear skirts, with their strange nether openness and vulnerability, while boys get to wear trousers? And why do girls like to talk so much, and what do they say to each other all the time? Such questions, and courtship, and marriage, eclipsed the stars, which yet seemed to hang waiting for Geoffrey to get to know them. One summer, while renting a seaside place with a long deck, he had purchased a pocket guide to the heavens and (with difficulty, for the blazing points strewn across the black dome overhead made a poor match with the little diagrams picked out by dying flashlight) taught himself the summer triangle of bright stars, Deneb and Altair and Vega, and a few prominent constellations—Andromeda’s flying V, and cruciform Cygnus, and boxy little Lyra, and Cepheus, shaped like a house in a child’s drawing.

In these decipherings—the planks of the deck rough beneath his bare feet, the shingled house alive with lights and the voices of his wife and children talking to one another—Parrish felt united with ancient generations. Man no sooner had attained erect posture than he began to try to unriddle the stars, to name them after gods and animals, and then to construct huge rings and pyramids of stone as if to demonstrate a placatory harmony with the cycles of the heavenly machine. Who was the first man—a creature scarcely more than ape—who realized that the frozen spatter above turned through the night like an off-center disc? And who were those wakeful wise men who first noticed the planets, the wanderers keeping their own slow looping paths across the surface of this disc? The stars were the fathers of speculation, of philosophy. Under Parrish’s gaze, as if he were suspended by his heels above an abysmal bowl, the stars seemed to sing, to scream in chorus. In actuality, he heard lonely sounds from the deck—the sea breaking on a distant beach, a bell buoy rocking outside the harbor, crickets droning in the dry grass. He would become dizzy, staring up. His neck would begin to hurt. His patience and his sense of spatial relations were limited, and, having satisfied himself with a few chronic identifications, or having, out of the corner of his eye, seemed to see a meteor fall, he would leave the deck to go back into the house, into the womanly warmth, the electric light.

And then the summer was over, the heavens mostly unlearned, and a new season of constellations sent to bewilder the eyes. Decades went by in which his acquaintance with the stars failed to advance. He read about them now and then in the newspapers—eclipses, meteor showers, astronomical discoveries of gigantic vacancies in the web of galaxies and of a mysterious apparent arc millions of light-years in length. Scanning the comic strips one day, while his wife tried to make breakfast conversation, he noticed a small article, with an illustration, stating that Jupiter and Mars were to undergo, this winter, a rare conjunction.

That evening, in spite of the cold, he took the torn-out illustration into his side yard, and there, above treetops that by coincidence closely matched the schematic ones in the drawing, shone the conjunction just as diagrammed—Jupiter bright and bluish, Mars smaller and red-tinged, a bit lower and to the right. He had studied the stars but not knowingly looked at a planet since the summer evenings, a half-century ago—could it be that long?—when his mother would dramatically gesture toward Venus. As he gazed, the stars surrounding the two conjoined planets swarmed into his vision, more and more of them as he looked, as if he were film in a developing pan; but he had no trouble finding the two planets again, their close pairing distinctive as a signature. The redness of Mars was lodged in its twinkle, a perhaps hallucinatory spark, whereas Jupiter’s blue glow appeared cool and steady. Parrish’s eyesight had deteriorated over the years. Without his glasses, near things blurred and far ones looked double. He needed a telescope. He began by suggesting to his wife that she might want to get him one for Christmas.

“Why don’t you get it for yourself?” Berenice asked. “I might get the wrong kind.”

“You’re as much an expert as I am,” he told her. “It’s like everything else—you go by the money. The more it costs, the better it probably is.”

“It would feel like a test you’re setting me. I’d be scared to get any except the most expensive, and then you’ll say I spent too much money.”

He wondered if this were just. True, everything she did lately seemed to him slightly excessive or insufficient, a bit too determined and rigid or else irritatingly casual and heedless; yet he imagined his irritation to be invisible within the vast context of their decades together, their children and now grandchildren, their ever-expanding, circumambient troth. They had met at college and married in a wave of passion; she was still a junior and he a poor graduate student. Aeons later, it turned out that she had resented truncating her education and sitting home mired in pregnancy and motherhood while he paraded off in a business suit to a glamorous world of credit-card lunches and smartly dressed young female lackeys. Well, he could not help feeling in response, he didn’t make the world, and he didn’t ask to be born a male, with a male’s responsibilities and prerogatives. Their children grew and went away, their automobiles became foreign and expensive, their houses increased in price and suburban remove, and at the center of all this centrifugal movement the cinder of her resentment remained, paired with his resentment of her resentment. He had laid his life at her feet, and all she cared about was gender politics.

She went on, “Everybody says how financially timid women are, the ones who aren’t extravagant, but look at the figures: your firm charges two hundred dollars an hour for your time and mine is absolutely worthless; I have to go give it away in volunteer work.”

“Or else stay in bed,” he said, “while I’m having a great time fighting the tunnel traffic.”

Parrish bought himself the telescope, wrapping it and putting it beneath the tree with a card saying “Love, Berenice.” The children and the grandchildren were impressed, and greedily took turns with it spying on their neighbors’ windows and bringing closer the distant skyscrapers of Boston. But in fact it was not a very expensive telescope; his wife’s uncertainties over the proper price to pay had infected him and made him cautious. Also, the very expensive ones looked too complicated. What he wanted was a tube that he would look into at one end and that would deliver reality, enlarged, at the other. This was not as easy as he had hoped. His own tremor jiggled the image, and the plastic eyepiece clicked against his glasses. A boat far from shore, a mere hyphen in the gray water, would reveal, in sudden focus, amazing detail—railings, and a pilothouse that needed paint, and a man in a watch cap and dark slicker standing on the forward deck within an eerie windless silence, an eerie ignorance of being seen. There was a bubble around things thus captured, a hermetic breathlessness and a pressure that squeezed the perspective flat.

On a clear night early in the new year, Parrish took the tripod and the telescope outdoors, and set it up on the snowy driveway, and aimed it at the conjunction. Through even this weak telescope the stars multiplied confusingly; Mars and Jupiter, though obvious to his naked eye, took a lot of calibrated groping to center in the lens. Tremors, not just his own but those of invisible events within the transparent atmosphere, beset the planets. Mars, at the maximum enlargement, remained disappointing—no canals, no red deserts, no polar icecaps, not even the impression of a sphere. Just a stubborn small hole, spitting red, in space. But Jupiter, that big smear of pallor nearby, did, unmistakably, thrillingly, resolve into a disc, a world calling out with its solemn white roundness across the deeps of space. He could not make out the churning stripes or the big oblong spot so vivid in Voyager photographs, but there *was* something unexpected—off to the side, four bright dots in a curving line, a kind of plume lifted upward, to the left. Could these be the famous moons, whose observation by Galileo marked the end of Ptolemaic astronomy? Parrish would not have expected them to extend so far out from the body of the mother globe, or to be so distinct, and organized in so smooth an arc. When he lifted his head and looked with the naked eye, Jupiter was still there but they were gone; when he peered again through the telescope, they had returned, in their unexpected pattern and vividness—a small school of the herring fish that lived in that beautiful sea.

His face and fingers and feet ached with the cold; tears in his eyes now added to the difficulties of vision. He took his equipment back into the house, keen to share the triumph of discovery; but his wife had already drifted into sleep. Though he did not again trouble to set up the telescope outdoors, all winter he would glance toward that section of sky he had explored, and watch twinkling red Mars slowly climb level with coolly glowing Jupiter and then imperceptibly, inexorably pull away, as if tracing some movement of titanic gears. The gap between them, once less than the moon’s breadth, opened as the smaller planet ascended, yet Parrish had no trouble keeping track of these specks of light. He had worn a small comfortable place in the spangled void where his gaze could rest as he stepped from the car, home from a party, a meeting, a trip.

He and Berenice had the habit, as spring approached, of travelling to a warm island for several weeks, to reward themselves for having endured another New England winter; even though now she was afraid of skin cancer, and stayed in their cabaña while he went to the beach, they still made the trip, with its flavor of honeymoon. The tropical stars were different—the few constellations he knew sprawled crazily at one side of the sky, distended by their new relation to the horizon. Yet the air was familiar, the humid fraught air of summer. Sitting after dinner on the hotel terrace while a steel band played beneath the stars, Parrish suddenly again saw, as if an inner telescope had zoomed, his wife and himself, before they married, on the flat pebbled roof of the Cambridge row house where he had lived as a graduate student. Rules had been numerous in that dark age, and she had come to him illegally, lying to her housemother so that she could spend the night. The sudden May heat was so great in his airless room they took blankets up to the pebbled roof, close to the stars, which their luminous bodies seemed to join; the spine of the galaxy bent above them like an immense torn pale rainbow. Wherever his eyes travelled on her body, splendor glimmered.

He asked Berenice to dance.

“To this music? We don’t know how.”

“You just shuffle, from the look of it.”

“Let the young people do it, Geoff. Don’t put me to the test.”

The test? Her face, white on the dim starlit terrace, while the black band poured forth its practiced jubilation, did not look old to him, but somehow closed, too firmly knit, as if her life, her life with him, were a wound that had nearly healed at last. Behind her, the warm dark sea, struck by the light of a full moon, seemed to lift in a bulge toward the other heavenly body’s cold brightness.

Back home, where the snow had all melted, Parrish stepped from the car and glanced toward the sky, and could find neither Mars nor Jupiter. They had parted and lost themselves among the less wandering stars. He could not believe it, and searched for minutes. His wife had taken the keys and gone into the house, turning on the switches, filling window after window with artificial light. Conscious of his breath, conscious of his heartbeat, he followed her in.