

VINCENT CASAREGOLA

Contrails

Walking out in early evening,
I glance upward for no reason
and see their mark across the sky,
tracing a miles-long X
somewhere near 30,000 feet.

Just airliners, the normal traffic,
and if I take the time,
I can trace courses, one
south by southeast towards warmth,
the other north by northwest.

Sign, artifact in tiny crystals—
I remember that my father, the chemist,
my elder brother, so gifted,
the engineer, would try to explain
how heat from engines, moisture,
and air pressure all combined.

No use, I always saw language,
crude but effective tracings,
words or fragments of words
from the moving finger of a god,
a fate, a monster, an angel even.

Angels, that's what they called it
in the gnostic slang of pilots,
back in World War II,
"Bandits at angels 30,"
gave altitude and ill intent,
till a smoke-gray shadow
spoke its will to death.

A boy from Kansas, Brooklyn,
or Alabama sweated to ice
in the wind-racked machine,
spilled the scent of fear
across the heavens.

While trying to keep a sight
on the tiny squares and rectangles,
the mere geometry that once
had stood for civilization,
the Gothic illusions of grace.

And another boy from Bremen
or Hamburg pointed toward heaven
and tried to slice apart
the shadows and wailing voices
with angry prayers of iron and fire.

An old woman or a child
could then consider the faces
the sky could make, the horror
the careless clouds could write,
no testament but mere graffiti.

All along, another sky watched
and waited while bones smoked
their kaddish from the crematories,
and the clouds breathed it all as dust,
turned it back as ice and rain.

A century of shadows, not innocence,
where vapors wrote the history—
as a child, I once looked up to see
a metallic sliver and glint of light,
a savior, a demon, a summons.

VINCENT CASAREGOLA is a Professor of English and Film Studies at Saint Louis University, where he is now Director of Film Studies and also teaches poetry. He has published poetry in a number of journals, and his work has appeared most recently in *The Examined Life* and *Natural Bridge*.