

FRANK PAINO

# Cephalophores

I must have been twelve  
the first time I heard it—  
*cephalophores*...  
the word vaguely phallic  
on the tongue of the young nun  
I'd fallen in love with,  
the one who introduced us  
to the host of decapitated  
saints who lifted their severed heads  
from the blood-stained ground  
and walked—sometimes  
for miles, sometimes singing—  
until they finally lay down  
forever, faces cradled in the  
cups of their upturned palms.

So many someone invented  
a word for them.

So many you don't have to look  
hard to find one fracturing  
light into soft rainbows  
high in an old church window or  
standing stone-still on a pedestal,  
grisly freight held up  
like a child's first lost tooth.

Here, a bishop hoists his head  
heavenward by the fish-mouth  
of his scarlet miter. Here, the calm  
countenance of a young girl floats  
like an unleashed dog  
just ahead of the strolling corpse  
who lately followed its dictation.

One ravishing saint, nude  
but modest beneath the drapery  
of her extravagant locks,  
thrusts the macabre lantern  
of her luminous face  
into the hoop of darkness  
formed by the retreating mob.

Another stoops, well-muscled  
arms outstretched, to grasp  
his head which rests upon  
the crimson marble stairs.

For some, the nimbus burns  
a hole into the absence  
just above the severed throat,  
while others bear the light  
in polished golden rings  
that circle the drifting brow.

As a child, they haunted my  
thunderstorm nights, slouching  
in black hollows, harrowing  
the foot of my bed  
where they'd cast terrible,  
truncated shadows  
across the coverlet  
when lightning tore the sky  
in jagged, gunmetal seams.

Four decades beyond my childish fears,  
the headless still keep me awake  
some nights, though nowadays  
they appear as unwilling martyrs  
of gods and governments,  
men and women who kneel  
in sad rooms  
halfway around the world,  
their grainy, televised faces  
turning from sharp fate,  
and, having undergone  
such rough divorce,  
give the lie to pious fantasies.  
They cannot stoop to lift  
all they have lost and bear it  
to some marvelous conclusion.

Sleepless now, I long for  
those faraway fears.  
What wouldn't I do to conjure  
the cephalophores  
to lie with me upon this shroud  
of twisted bedsheets  
and become again  
my deepest dread?  
I would hold their heads  
in my tremulous hands,  
kiss the ice-blue  
mouths of the haloed dead,  
their lips tasting of  
copper and communion  
wine. I would let their blood  
pool upon my pillow  
in the spilt moonlight.  
I would let them  
have their way with me.  
Whatever it might take.  
Anything. Anything at all.

Frank Paino has received a Pushcart Prize and the Cleveland Arts Prize for Literature. His first two volumes of poetry were published by Cleveland State University Press: *The Rapture of Matter* (1991) and *Out of Eden* (1997). This poem is from his recently completed third manuscript, *Swallow*.