

William Winfield Wright

## Cosmonauts

*What Khrushchev Knows*

Our sky is the higher sky,  
above whatever they might put there.

Mercury, Gemini, they think  
they are the Romans renaming the Greeks.

They think they will bury us  
with wheat and abstract expressionism.

They think they can poke the eye of God  
and ride off on his sheep.

I know their terms, recognize  
the sparkling insignificance of their charm.

It is we who hit the moon, we who smile  
into their faces with our practical Soviet teeth,

we who breed the cosmonauts who tumble  
and then land on the practical Soviet ground.

*Matisse's Goldfish*

You don't even have to let go.  
It just happens like a car crash  
or a bowl of goldfish.  
Everything floats. Everything's equal,  
a glove, directions, the keys to start the engines.  
From each according to his abilities,  
to each the chance to fly  
between all sides of the container,  
free in a world where every direction is up.



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*The Hands on Einstein's Watch*

The clock you take with  
will slowly lag  
the clock you leave behind  
until the moment when  
your twin marries your lover  
and their bearded children  
welcome you back  
to whatever year it is.

*Economies of Scale*

The first balloonists could wave and shout,  
got stuck on chimneys like storks,

disturbed and then charmed farmers,  
took along the mayor and his girlfriends,

and were so close and novel that they  
could hear singing and drop presents.

Up here now we go unnoticed,  
too far and too familiar,

though perhaps someone can see  
this small light something like a star

in the dark above a rooftop,  
on the way home or back to bed,

out a kitchen window  
through the limbs of a tree before dawn.

*Angle of Reentry*

The air is heavy on the way up,  
hot on the way down,  
but it is not fatigue that keeps  
our spacewalks short.



It's joy and the immediate  
recognition that there is  
nothing like this  
for us when we return.

*Retirement for Yuri Gagarin*

There was a time when a sailor, say,  
could turn his back on the sea,  
pick up an oar and walk inland  
for no more than a day before  
someone would ask, "Hey what's that  
on shoulder? What do you have there?"  
and know it was safe to stop.

Television has made everything famous,  
and it's just a dream in a state-owned apartment  
in this giant city to wake up one morning  
and take this old helmet out into the country  
far enough to use as a bucket, a fishbowl,  
a planter, the sufficient and empty head  
of some small farm's tired scarecrow.

*Perestroika*

Up here it is still  
the Soviet Union, the idea  
however broken that  
this blue world is all connected.  
Perhaps they will leave me here,  
an icon at my little window  
passing over what once were  
our 2½ oceans,  
resetting my watch  
for each of our 11 time zones.

*Laika as Argos, Laika as Sphinx*

The Greeks invented mailmen and dog biscuits.  
Just ask bright Argos from the Odyssey.



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The Romans invented a dog in turn  
who raised twins and then a city.

There's that dog with Tyr's hand in its mouth,  
that dog who barks out stars,

the dog in the manger, the dog on the bridge,  
the three dogs who lose a bet and move to Moscow.

In one Russian fairy tale, the master runs off  
while the loyal dog wrestles with a floating corpse.

It's as lonely to be left behind  
in the kitchen as out in the stars.

It's as foolish to toss up a teacup  
when we don't have a plan to bring it down.

That boy who cried wolf?  
Maybe "Wolf" was the name of his dog.

Laika means barker, which was her only job  
as she turned upside down in space.

It's dogs like her who wait outside train stations,  
on graves, and inside hot cars,

even at incredible speeds  
up past the air in the night.

