

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.

