

winter sequence

wind-shadows  
on the wall  
    cold night

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snowflakes  
breaking apart  
on the window

    who is caring  
    for you?

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the world  
without its voice

    deep snow

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the sound  
of melting snow

and somewhere  
high above me

    the cardinal's  
    red song

a sky as big as texas

i.

the mind,  
refusing to accept  
the height the distance  
the speed at which  
one *here*  
is replaced with another  
plummets into sleep  
and dreams of the city  
around which all other cities  
orbit as variation  
and though you were  
born there  
you cannot name it  
though you lived there  
for decades  
you can only recall  
the road leading  
away  
the gentle  
downward slope  
the dust mixing the air  
into sunlight  
it is your first  
memory  
do not worry:  
it is my first memory  
as well

ii.

do not worry: while you sleep  
your body unclasps  
the seatbelt of gravity  
and seeks an oracle  
of the clouds:  
at such a vantage  
they take your shadow  
your questions

in one wisp of hand  
and say *yes*  
*we will meet here*  
*and here and here . . .*

like any other Wednesday

1.

Yuri Gagarin walks through a farm field. It is early, a little after 8 o'clock, but days always begin early on a farm (*he* woke up at 5:30 that morning). As he walks, Yuri gives himself up to reverie: he is following his father as they head out to repair the barn door; he is proudly gripping his father's roll of carpentry tools in his small hands.

Who knows how long before he notices the farmwife and her daughter.

It is a clear day. The wind comes softly from the east, blowing the swallows around like toy kites. A friendly man, Yuri smiles at his comrades. Perhaps he waves.

The women back away in fear.

2.

Yuri Gagarin hurtles through space. Nestled in his metal sphere, Yuri keeps himself busy. He checks, and rechecks, the instruments, radios status reports to the Cosmodrome, updates the flight plan: all of the various, mundane activities that keep his spacecraft in orbit.

Perhaps he is humming, or at least thinking of an appropriate tune. Maybe something by Tchaikovsky or Stravinsky. Or perhaps he is thinking how much the Vostok 3KA-3 reminds him of the pines around his family's farm. How in the winter, as the snow fell without a sound, he would sneak out of bed and stay at the window until the clouds broke and revealed the black sky. His sky.

How he would say softly, and only to himself, the different names he knew for that sky. How he later felt their echoes in Roerich's landscapes. How he always knew they contained eternity.

3.

Yuri Gagarin stands in a farm field. He is on his way to retrieve a hammer for his father, but something catches his eye.

It is a clear day. The wind blows softly from the north. White clouds billow and tower and around them a sky as blue as his sister's eyes stretches and stretches and stretches.

Swallows rise and fall with the wind, small black dots in all that empty space.

Watching them, Yuri promises, "One day, I will be up there with you."

4.

Yuri Gagarin stops walking. The orange of his space suit catches the sun in an unnerving manner. His parachute hovers loosely around him like a deflated cloud.

The farmwife and her daughter are still backing away. Yuri calls to them, "Do not be afraid! I am a Soviet citizen like you, who has descended from space."

Laughing, he says, "And I must find a telephone to call Moscow!"

the story doesn't matter, only its telling

it is not a brave thing to let the conversation fade  
and shrink into the muteness of your chair

as the others build the fire up again,  
as a spider threads its home from fence post to fence post

it is not brave to notice these minute happenings  
nor to tip your head back and wonder

how many others sat off from those bright, warm faces  
to better see the constellations hanging in their own silver framework

it is not a brave thing to step into solitude  
if there is no other place to go

it is the natural course of things: a fire sputtering into ash,  
a spider re-pinning its web,

a star falling dim and mute with morning

willow grove

all morning i watched the river, its body pierced with june-honed light,  
slip off as easy as it did yesterday, as easy as the day before.

i thought about the saints and how they are often depicted in their martyrdom:

faces immaculate and slightly upturned  
as a lion rips muscle from the chest

eyes thoughtful and inward-peering  
as the fire wraps another tongue around the neck

as if this were simply the next mundanity, the next line crossed off a growing list of chores.

there are those that would pause here a moment and walk off, thinking *such peacefulness*.  
there are those that would turn their back and declare *life is a rough, hard stone*.

and there are those, too, that would linger and if asked, would tell you they hear a sound like  
strong wind in a willow grove.

in the other room, a wasp kisses its body against the window,  
desperate to return its hum to the world.

this sheperd wind

after the rain: a fresh towel of sky, the tilted light of evening, a sadness  
resting on my chest like a small, smooth stone

i am sitting by the river again, watching the spill, the churn, the color  
peel off the beveled rocks

i am sitting also by another river,  
watching also the seepage of night across a city's low rim

how strange that our existence is not singular:  
to discover self knitted to self with a thin, gray thread

one asks

*what do you call your brother now?*

the other replies

*how strange that a weight shared does not grow lighter*

one asks

*where are you in your grief?*

the other eyes the clouds passing huge and low through the mountains

he says

*each is called home by the herder's song*

a light in the window that could be the moon

sitting at the table, long after night  
has blown out the presence of the world

i feel the dry well of my heart grow deeper,  
feel the shovel scrape into the sleeping earth of myself

out of the darkness, the river begins to speak to me in my brother's voice

but i get up and shut the window:  
i do not want to believe in this sort of possession

that a room, once emptied, can be emptied again



verdant

whoever you are,  
your first thought upon waking  
in Johnson, Vermont  
is *green*:  
the gardens, the river's drone,  
the dreams simmering off into nothing

even the light comes at you stained

i blame the mountains, their removed  
yet inescapable presence  
like that stern, widowed aunt  
you were forced to spend  
a handful of summers with

it would be years before you realized  
she was green once, too, and often  
woke long before sunrise, so much of everything  
screaming in her bones

Mary Oliver, circa 1958

in Austerlitz, in the summer—  
there is only room for these things  
in the summer—

as the sunlight spread its thick blanket  
over the lawn and the sky  
rearranged its library of clouds,

as the drifting shade touched  
the corner of Edna's white house,  
which became your own six years before,

and the cardinal, which was another  
of your dwellings, began to sing somewhere  
deep within the maple grove,

as you stood in that stone hallway  
just outside the parlor's entrance,  
your hand still on the doorknob,

still holding on to the framework of the real,  
you saw, leaning on the mantelpiece—  
could it really be so easy?—

that unintentioned and blunderous  
spark, the first and only miracle,  
your everlasting snare and plummet

the mink

let us sing about the body, that summer  
animal, that slip of moon the sky still craves

let us sing about desire, that flooded forest,  
that knot of air discovered behind every possible thing

let us sing of the yaw, the breadth, the rend of our looking  
lets us sing of the burl, the crater, the slouched mountain of being seen

let us sing about the stuttering of time across  
our bonework, the ache heaving up from

our cores, the sinews bucking against our skin,  
desperate to taste another's motion, to lash another's fire to our own

let us sing about the unsingable:

the river hungry to contain the mink's slick passage,  
the bankline caught in unrelenting coil of its hunt