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... A Shepherd Walks the Moon

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... A SHEPHERD WALKS THE MOON

I.
A woodchuck wakened
four days prematurely
relieves himself on shadow's head
before plunging back to burrow.
As the world waits
watching clocks through mirrors
three men drink orange juice
calming each other's fears.

It's early spring
and we're alone on Holland Beach
watching slush filled waves beat new circulation
into ice crusted winter shores.
Titan fingers of alloyed steel
point the slender missile toward the moon
connecting the two worlds
like the drive shaft of some cosmic locomotive.

In the scrub of opposite bank
wolverine eyes caress the body
of newborn otter as it slides
again and again into the stream.

II.
Like an artificial comet the ship moves
on a predestined course toward the moon.
For days of endless night it travels alone
its ties with mother earth severed
like the umbilical cord of a newborn child.

Space is a living theatre;
beyond the confines of earth's atmosphere, the milky way at last
reveals its true magnificence
like a man long squatting, rising
to stretch.
At last within the moon's weak gravitational pull the ship swings from its endless path
to establish a new orbit, spiraling
closer and closer to the barren world until,
at the predetermined distance, retro rockets
flash and the orbit is firm.

Stars, infinite in number are
the only witnesses to this feat
of three earthlings, but having seen
the birth of suns and the death
of galaxies, this one accomplishment
means no more to them than the first
movements of a newborn slug.
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Time’s patience lost
the missile lunges skyward
carrying its precious payload
stages falling behind
until the capsule moves unfettered
piercing the blackness of space
like flame on spider’s web.

In the scrub of opposite bank
wolverine eyes caress the body
of newborn otter as it slides
again and again into the stream.

In summer’s heat
we’ll picnic here
spitting melon seeds
into thermal sand.

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of three earthlings, but having seen
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of galaxies, this one accomplishment means no more to them than the first movements of a newborn slug.
On earth millions are holding their breath as two astronauts transfer to the tiny lunar module. There are uneasy moments over linkage release, then a massive sigh of relief as the module slowly pulls away from the mother capsule. Later the LEM sits immobile on the powdered surface like a metallic mole on the face of the moon.

III. EARTHRISE

The sun drifts like a yoke on the white of the sky.
Below, the beach is smoothed by a bulldozer driven by a man with a two day growth on his face.
As he levels the hills created by winter's wind and snow last summer's litter comes to surface. Eventually it will all be covered by virgin sand; but by summer's end the beach will again be violated.

Night crawls slowly across the blue green planet, most distinctive in the moon's horizon; like a dog chasing its tail in slow motion.
Great masses of clouds swirl; dark grey and angry, wispy and benign, in endless confusion.
And beyond the ragged edge of night, day moves sandwiched between eve and dawn.
Each rotation it fights to establish light a few seconds longer, but remains sandwiched: day is short when winter rules; in summer's reign day is long; then winter comes.

Hidden from the ground
the hooked birth tooth of the fledgling cracks the thin wall of his egg.
Exhausted by the very act of birth the baby bird can only stand and shiver as its cry for food pierces the stillness of morning.

IV. FIRST ASTRONAUT

We sit in the valley between two such hills and sip coffee from a single cup; the steam rises into the air in a futile effort to warm what had been cold for nine months.
From the crest of this space worn crater I can see the whole of my planet; its yesterday, today, and tomorrow. But of its people I see nothing.
When clouds part briefly, I can see the coast of my homeland but it's merely a circular map, flat, without life.

With a last gasping shudder the cat passes the red jelly afterbirth into the loose brown sand.
There it sits quivering, glistening in the moon's pale light, waiting to be eaten by the feline so gingerly licking the blood still dripping from her womb.
There is a certain loneliness here one does not become aware of on earth because life beneath our atmosphere is designed to prevent such knowledge.
Busywork occupies our minds with war, hunger, and disease, and politics. All religion and philosophy endeavor to mask loneliness with words and bright promises of things to come. But no, I do not make light of these; we depend on those promises and words. But here I have none of those and I weep for my people.
How often they have tried to gather themselves together, each time to fail.
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How often they have tried to gather themselves together, each time to fail.
Because when hunger slackened
and diseases were conquered
when war, politics, and religion
and philosophy were recognized
as empty words and promises,
they began to be lonely
and preferred the former
to this their oldest
strongest of fears.
The awareness of my own loneliness
here on a planet which cannot offer
even my basic life requirements
is bearable only in that the knowledge
of an entire people's loneliness
makes my own seem slight by comparison.
Our existence is like the empty cask
of a featureless caterpillar
turned to a departed butterfly;
our substance is discarded refuse,
the walking dust of the universe.

V. SECOND ASTRONAUT

_Barely dry from birth's protective fluids_
_the spotted fawn struggles to its feet,
stumbles to its knees, then stands_
on its thin wobbling legs. Its first_
_movements are toward its mother's breast._

Walking through moon dust
is like walking through
a giant ashtray
wearing heavy boots.
It seems almost damp
clinging slightly to
your feet like weightless
clay, but like powder
it will fall away
if you shake your foot.

Preflight briefing informed
me that it is hardly
ever over a few
inches deep but I keep
thinking that I will step
into a spot that is
far deeper and will sink
slowly from sight like an
animal in quicksand,
They would of course erect
a monument to me
somewhere and I would be
the first charter member
of the Moon Rock Garden
Lunar Cemetery.

_Three or four people arrive later;
our groups make no effort to
communicate, and but for the_
brisk breeze from the lake
_which beats on us all,
we remain alone._

I've often wondered why
they never sent robots
or machines here instead
of men. I think they could
do the job just as well;
the Russians succeeded
to a degree, but then
Americans have no
desire to allow
open substitution
of a human being
by an inferior
box of wires and bolts.
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box of wires and bolts.
And can’t you imagine
a machine in New York
in a long limousine
waving gravely to crowds
cheering wildly, tossing
tons of white tickertape
on his battered casings?

VI. THIRD ASTRONAUT

In the hollowed center of the wooden den
half-submerged in the spring’s dammed waters
the female beaver lies quietly on her side
as hairless blind newborn young
suckle with pushing paws and gurgling noises.

The trouble with civilians
is that they fail to look past
the glamor of this sort of thing;
they don’t realize that the most
important part of this mission
is the command module.
The lunar module is a flimsy
piece of foil which would disintegrate
in earth’s atmosphere; without
this ship none of us could return.

There are no boats on the lake today
because the water is choppy
and unsafe for the small boats
which crowd the off shore waters in summer.

Past policy had been that
the commander of the mother module
is leader of the next mission
landing party, but we never know
when Congress will cut off our finances
so I guess it’s understandable
why I’m anxious at being
the one left here this time.

The lighthouse at the end of the pier
booms out its warning across the water
like a flashing light at a deserted intersection;
and the gulls dip and the fish dart
and the water between seems to sigh.

VII.

The wind is chilly, but in our hollow
stripped to trunks and tee shirts
we feel only the sun’s warmth.
When the sun disappears behind a cloud
we are forced to dress in haste.

Departing the surface of the moon
they jetison the landing stage and
odds and ends of equipment as their
monument of a successful flight,
or as some say, a multi-
million dollar contribution to
the Lunar Sanitary Land-Fill.

To the three men inside the capsules
the sounds of the docking procedure
are like the heavy click falling of
the tumblers in an iron safe’s door.
The journey from the moon to the earth
is uneventful; rather dull with
checking and re-checking routines, then
comparing with computer cross checks
on earth. As they enter earth’s atmosphere
ground radio contact is broken.
A few minutes later the capsule
flips like a doughnut in hot grease
and the heat shield outside the capsule
is a cherry red glow like the end
of a cigarette in a dark room.

The sun seems to have forgotten us
so we pick up our blanket and start
back to the car. Clouds have begun
to form and it looks like it might
snow once more before giving in to spring.
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VIII.

The grey field mouse moves swiftly under the blanket of night but not as swift as the swooping horned owl as its talons bite deeply into the quivering flesh.

Grey ships of steel prowl the waters like a pack of old hunting hounds baying in the night, searching their game. At last the bright flash in a cloud bank reveals its hiding place and all ships in the area race to be first to the down coming capsule. With its parachutes full, like the outstretched wings of a mallard landing in its marshy nesting grounds, the capsule settles closer and closer to the sea. Then with a sort of plop it bobs in the water like an empty can carelessly abandoned by some great giant. Within minutes frog men reach the capsule and secure it with bouyant belts. There is a pause as they wait for greetings from the men inside. Excitement drowns the silence from within as the goggled, flippered men pop the outer hatch. The three inside appear asleep at first but upon closer examination are quite dead.

At supper tonight Mrs. Rabbit will nurse one less because watchful eyes saw her leave the nest just once. Now a saliva dripping mouth carries supper home to her own brood.

IX.

On earth people will forget the deaths of those who offered their bodies as stepping stones to the stars; just as the stars themselves have no conscious memory. the three will be names in a new edition of some history book but the times are too fast and their time too short for legends to grow; so when the tears shed by their mourners have dried, they will be no more, just names.

Two in death have now found peace; their hungers satisfied their fears calmed. The third, the lonely man, wanders forever alone forever longing.

Ronnie M. Lane
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