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... A Shepherd Walks the Moon

Ronnie M. Lane
Grand Valley State University

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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.

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.*

*In a cave near
Winter Road River
two brown bears
are deep in slumber
fall love lingering, glistening
frozen drops on fur.*

*Wrapped in light jackets
we huddle in a fashioned hollow
in the side of a dune.*

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.*

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.

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.

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.*

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