

First Poet on the International Space Station

On launch day they'd strapped me lovingly,
(my hands too trembly to buckle myself)
into a tilted seat, and said goodbye.

It's an unexpected job. I'm expected
to write the first poem ever sent from space,
though I'd told the committee I was laughing-

ly underqualified. How can a poet be a poet
without gravity? Well, here I am, alive
in the strangest way, the first starry Monday of May,

and I chatter too much, tell the crew too many times
my fears of flying, of falling into swamps (Everglades, pythons),
of the wingspans of birds, of diseases carried on feathers.

Of tight corrugated spaces and elongated silence.
Of continuous states of free fall.
Of continuous ellipses of fixation.

Down the hall or module or whatever,
the scientists tinker and turn their dials.
I've thought to jot down ideas

about the shape of the Earth,
and the tufted cumulus or cirrus, or maybe just clouds,
fussing around the circumference. So far

I've drifted alone each morning
into the windowed cupola, between rainbows
rocketing off solar arrays, and I've gasped

as angels of light rushed past me,
as if flushed like doves from the black thickets
of untrimmed air. Boy, do I ever wish

you could see this: her blue orb collared in uneven lace,
her land mass swallowed by oceans. Every twenty-four hours,
we pass over the planet fifteen times,

like we're driving in circles through a town
that's seen better days, and at first I would startle
at the shimmy, the rattle, the grinding startling voice

that wasn't God—and wasn't not—
but lately I'm better at controlling myself.
I've started to think more Sundays,

I should have driven my kids
to religious school—that time I'd asked my daughter
to name the tallest person in the Bible and she'd guessed

Abraham Lincoln, then James and the Giant Peach—
and now I see acutely the damage I've done. Out here,
you borrow your favorite books from memory.

Out here, you vow to follow
one day a week as the Sabbath, and to that end
you crave the light from two candles

vanishing above a homemade meal. Through pinholes
you once called eyes, you see what lavish things
you've left, and hope the corner jewelry shoppe

in the Marais still ribbons a bottle
of patchouli perfume onto every iridescent box
of *les bijoux*. That the black lips of an orphaned lamb

still suckle the kind farmer's bottle in New Zealand,
and the rifled soldier in the old quarters of Jerusalem,
his eyes shifting right to left, hurries tourists unharmed

through the labyrinth of a colorful shuk.
You make believe that the pull of the earth
will always hang a young girl's gold locket

from her neck as she bites her bottom lip and erases
and erases again her long division. I might have done
a better job of reclining by screened windows

when the rain showed up, could have listened longer
to its small hammers bobbing on the silver awnings.
Taken more notes. Kept more journals.

Out here, we have no rain, no tilt of a plane's wings
over the terrain of Manhattan, no whine
of our missing dog by the back screened door.

Yet I need to stay grounded if I'm to succeed.
If you're fortunate to have been lifted
as high as perception allows, like a girl

on a rope swing in a strawberry bikini
who has picked the perfect y-coordinate
to pitch into the cold creek below,

the job lands with such grave responsibility.
My first lines might be

*"Why was this place never exactly what we wanted,
when it was actually all we had"*

Who in their right mind
accepts an unpaid position in space,
yet I'm speeding 220 miles

above you, notebook in hand, suspicious
that if I strung all my words end to end
and pointed them like a settler's caravan

in the direction of home,
I still wouldn't have described one percent
of this tender wilderness.

How drop-dead gorgeous you are.