

Winter Moon

“Only the dazed silence that follows the heavy guns...”

[Catherine Anne Porter, “Pale Horse, Pale Rider”]



When the first snow fell in September, the cabin became lost in a silent sea of white; the ground would not reappear before June. Large moist flakes drifted in among the trees, covering everything. A few inches of snow accumulated on the roof in the first snowfall, and within a few weeks the cabin was blanketed by more than a foot. By mid-winter, drifts had completely buried the north and west sides of the cabin and only sparse southern sunlight lit the interior a few hours each day. Firewood was stacked against the south side of the cabin, next to the door, up to the broad eaves and five rows deep, enough for the year.

Tonight, smoke trails up from the stone chimney into the still air.

Inside, a kettle bubbles on the wood stove, which is so hot its sides glow dull red. A smaller fire crackles and blazes in the fireplace. The cabin is hot, humid from the perpetual stew simmering next to the kettle. A man moves deliberately inside the cabin preparing dinner. The sun is long gone and the liquid glow of the unrisen full moon is shining on the snowy wilderness outside.



Now the cabin door stands open, amber lantern light fanning out onto the snow. A man is leaning against a tree, gazing out toward the frozen lake, where the surface of the snow flows unbroken onto the ice and across it into

the snow-packed forest and hills beyond. The moonlight glows bright upon the perfect flatness of the lake, white on black.

Wearily, he straightens up and regains his balance. After a long moment, he begins to walk slowly, deliberately, down the path to the lake. With each step, the frozen crust holds half his weight, and then collapses and his feet sink deep into the snow.

Reaching a leafless oak at the edge of the lake, he slowly sinks down against it until he is sitting on his heels, propped against the trunk. He looks around abruptly, as if just noticing he has lost something, and he shivers. The cold penetrates his woolen coat, but there is very little shivering left to be done.

The cabin stands open behind him, up the path through the trees, but the air is still and the frozen night only gradually chills the warm space within. He imagines the fireplace and its dancing flames, and the glowing stove, and the bubbling stew. Some of that stew still warms his belly with a satisfying fullness.

His vision is fading and a blissful delirium of whiteness overcomes him, slowly and gently merging with the white moonlight and the white snow and the white pallor of his frozen skin.

Splashdown. He remembers the splashdown. He feels his heart swell with something personal, possibly tragic, possibly joyful. Once he knew the joy of being a person, alive, visiting the moon.

The moonlight is steadily brighter over the lake. The man has been motionless for some time. The tip of the moon's disc has finally appeared above the low mountains at the far end of the lake. A silvery liquid light floods across the snow crust like a pool of mercury covering the layers of snow and solid water.

The reflected light shines on the man's frosted beard, illuminating his face from below. He inhales once, very carefully, a half-breath. In his dream he sees the moon, rising so slowly it is not moving, and in the dream he sees his footprints in the lunar dust.

He was not the first, not the last.

Blasting off from the Florida peninsula over a glistening Atlantic in a thunderous quaking metal cage to orbit the Earth, looking down on civilization itself, orbiting, preparing, awaiting a mysteriously precise

moment to push off against invisible forces and leave all humankind behind.

Later, entering lunar orbit with his brother in flight, climbing awkwardly alone into the excursion module.

The long floating orbits before descent, the shaking and creak and tenuous near destruction of the fragile LEM descending, the infinite moment of touchdown.

Stepping out, and the short climb down onto the lunar surface. Then, alone, one man, with threads of his own humanity stretching back to every other human alive, leading them all for a few precious hours in impossible loneliness and triumph.

Timeless hours, filled to exhaustion with every minute detail of the lunar landscape, mechanical execution of research tasks, while all around the cloudless black space rained stars down on him like crystals of the finest snow. The edge of the sun touched the perfect sharpness of the horizon, etching shadows of near-absolute black in the rippled footprints of his boots. The LEM stood draped in gold foil, while the flag of his tribe hung frozen in the airless void.

The moon remained imprinted on his retinas when he returned to lunar orbit, and he could see nothing else, even as he and his copilot guided the tiny ship for reinsertion into Earth orbit. The moon was all he saw during the long voyage back, through the shattering cacophony of deceleration, the shudder and impact of splashdown.

Not the first, not the last.

The moon rises over the frozen lake, silver on silver. Its light grows and moves to him, and envelopes him, and holds him close while the last molecules of air drift gently from his lungs, and float into the cold winter night.