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Apologue

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Apologue

*Don't imagine this as anything
beyond the old arc snapped, covenant entirely
broken, our ships no more than silver needles
trying the boundless haystacks of the stars.*

FROM BETTY ADCOCK'S "FALLEN"

Long before the shining capsule, swaying
like a seed, splashed into the ocean, and they
reappeared from it bearded and waving, the men
sent animals—the way they had birds
and mules into mineshafts—first into orbit
and then deep space beyond it: anaesthetized,
harnessed, electrodes in their brains—another
kind of husbandry. Chimpanzees, cats,
tortoises, dogs, rats, rabbits, pigs, silkworms,
salamanders, bees—spiders to see
if they would weave, eggs to see if they would hatch.
All of it in search of what might be
workable for themselves in artificial air,
weatherless time, in a gravity-suspended
replica of light. They watched from the blinds
of telescopes, lenses, clipboards, slide rules—
theirs the atmosphere of a nervous
curiosity.

The void beyond them
they claimed—the way they always had—as some
better, necessary place in the face
of ruin, of greed, the cosmos a floodlessness,
the wilderness a cleaner thicket of stars,
something they thought they knew by naming,
by seeing themselves, their fables dying
in the patterns. Desperate to reach it, after

the animals burned, they, too, burned at the launches,
or exploded to atomize like a virga
that hangs, drifts, and never reaches the earth.
When the space shuttle disintegrated over
East Texas, the bodies of astronauts were scattered
piecemeal all over the Big Thicket; searchers
tried to salvage the dismembered strewn
amongst the wreckage and reassemble them
in the sanctuary of a church—first, to save them
from being devoured by wild boars, then
in an attempt to knit them again to a name,
by fingerprint, DNA from a lock
of hair—nothing left but samples.

Something
did survive the fire, though, the fall, some
small canistered experiment involving
free-living creatures thin as eyelashes
recovered alongside a severed hand
still gloved, head helmeted; a form the size
of a comma was let fall to that violent
reversal of the garden, unharmed, fated
to return to the laboratory's tests and trials:
C. elegans, common nematode, wild ecology
unknown, named from the Greek for *thread*,
spin, *needle*, and *form*—bewildering,
what notion they will take from it.