

Falling to Earth

Alena Sapienza, College of Arts and Science

“We are 7 billion worlds living on one planet.” I whispered this line aloud to myself. My words landed flat in the still night air, but they rang in my ears. I stood on my driveway under the vast night sky. A quarter mile away, semi-trucks passed by on their way to distant places. Along the same roads, drag racers with unknown faces would leave tire marks. The crickets kept singing to their lovers. Tomorrow, unnamed tattered men and women would stand ignored at the end of exit ramps as thousands of commuters passed them by. The sense of my own singularity overwhelmed me: *I am one world in seven billion.*

Only a few minutes before, I had been writing my college admissions essay in my bedroom under the yellow light of my desktop lamp, my bedroom door shut and my blinds closed, my room swaddled in a warm glow of lamplight. The light reflecting off the walls cast long shadows across my room. I was attempting to explain what I believed was love to college admissions staff, but the worlds outside mine made themselves known in sounds. The crickets sang a melody to the deep, purring chuffing of the tigers living in the zoo across the street. Above both came the noise of revving engines from the nearby interstate as the drag racers took advantage of 2:00 am’s empty lanes. My street lay sleeping. Only my windows showed signs of wakefulness; however, the sounds led my eyes to drift from my blinking cursor and my unfinished thoughts towards the window to my left. I stared at the window, even though the closed white slat blinds kept the outside world hidden from sight. I needed to see what I could not see, so I placed my hands on my knees and pressed myself up from my desk chair to stand.

Then, I made my way to my bedroom door, turned the knob, and walked to the top of the stairs. Feeling for each step, I cautiously made my way down the singular flight to the first floor in the dark. I ran my hands over the walls of the stairwell and then the cabinets in the kitchen to orient myself until I reached the back door. The door opened with a click and a soft sigh as if I had broken a seal. Now, I imagine in that moment that my house was my spaceship so that when I shut the back door behind me the airlock had to reset. The house sounded as if it were exhaling at my departure. I had stepped out onto the driveway.

Keeping my back to the house, I saw the detached garage looming to my right, the tops of trees and rooftops filling my left where the land sloped downward. The cool fall air met the bare skin of my arms and crept up the legs of my pajamas. I felt as if I was the only person in the world; the elements gifting me alone with their sensations. The driveway treated my bare feet to its rough, damp surface, yet I was just one of billions. My gaze rose to the stars. A plane passed through my line of sight, distinguishable by its blinking lights and the distant rumble of its engines. The crickets were still singing in the background, accompanied by hoots of an owl coming from the tops of the trees, punctuation to the stream of other sounds reaching my ears. I got lost within the black depths of the sky that filled the space between each pinpoint of starlight.

Earlier that day in the kitchen, as I stuck a spoon into my jar of peanut butter for my post-practice, pre-dinner snack, my mom had stopped me to talk about a book to which she had been listening to that day at work. She wanted to share a line that began one of the chapters: “We are not 7 billion people living in one world; we are 7 billion worlds living on one planet.” I told her I

thought that the concept was cool, and that I was looking forward to reading the book. Back then and even today, we often read books in sequence: she read a book and then I read it to make our own mini-book club. I believe I went on to collect the dirty clothes from my room upstairs and put them in the hamper by the basement, and afterwards, I probably grabbed a handful of grapes from the fridge before walking back up the stairs to do my homework.

This conversation with my mom was the moment from which came the line I spoke to myself on my driveway while taking a break from considering love. That night outside, I closed my eyes to shut out the endless sky and the stream of sounds only to find that my mind was spinning, my consciousness falling. My heart was falling too, as if by looking deeply into the space between the stars I had taken a step forward and found no ground to set my feet upon. I was falling through space. One of 7 billion, unknown by others. No one could reach me within my world and I could not reach them. Behind my closed eyelids, I could envision people, each falling within their individual worlds, and within each person's space orbited their thoughts, their beliefs, their memories and life experiences. These dynamic spaces often shifted so as never to interlock or intersect with each other.

At six years old, I had a dream in which I saw the full expanse of our Earth from space: a shining marble filled with vibrant blues and greens, overlaid with streaks of white. Within the dream, I remember my eyes widening in wonder as I looked upon the planet from my place among the stars. It radiated light despite the darkness that extended in all directions around it. In an attempt to comprehend the implications of planets, solar systems, and space, my developing mind must have needed to put my consciousness within space's infinite expanse.

This dream occurred after I learned we lived in space. I could see what made it difficult to believe hundreds of years ago in the idea that our world was round; the image of ourselves suspended within black space on a globe is unbelievably fantastic.

The dream offered a dizzying perspective—I was flying through the vacuum around our planet. I felt no sensations other than a lack of awareness of my body. In my view, the Earth began to rotate faster and faster on its axis. A feeling of nausea accompanied my spatial disorientation. I began to perceive that my image of Earth was getting larger, as if my sight were a camera lens that had abruptly zoomed, and that I was falling through the atmosphere. With a brief moment of resistance, a tug, I sped through time and space, and my nausea settled into a hard knot of anxiety resting against my pelvis as I fell face first toward Earth's surface.

I awoke suddenly, my chest pounding, when the surface of the planet had become dangerously close—just before the fatal impact.

After the dream, I found this new vision of planet Earth frighteningly foreign compared to my own, small world in Shawnee, Kansas a world encompassing only my house, my kindergarten classroom, and the local U6 soccer league's fields. Yet, I can recall, expressed in my familiar world, the same nauseating insecurities that I had felt in space. I would climb the front staircase of my Kansas house as it wound from the main floor up to the third floor. Pressed against the solid wall on my right as I climbed, I shied away from what I felt to be a precipitous drop to the

left. Only the wooden bannister stood at the left side of each step to prevent me from falling through the open air back to the main floor, just as I had fallen through space to Earth's surface.

I never did fall through the fragile wooden spokes of the banister or topple over its railing, but I did have dreams about falling. In deep sleep, I would find myself standing on the third-floor landing, my hands each gripping a spoke, my face pressed between the two vertical pieces of wood, and my body shaking. I never stood in this position when I was awake; to even poke the wooden barrier with a finger extending from an outstretched arm seemed a daring feat. But in my sleep, I would stand pressed up against this insubstantial boundary between solid surface and open air and looking down, first onto the chandelier hanging from the ceiling not too far above my head, and then to the shining, wooden floor six flights of stairs below me. The dream always ended with me falling. I would somehow flip over the railing or slip through the banister and fall. At impact, I would wake up with a jerk to find myself spread-eagle in my bed, my chest rising and falling rapidly.

These childhood dreams came back to me as I stood on my driveway under the vast night sky. That night, more than ten years later, I felt the same nauseating feeling I had when falling in those dreams. This time, I stood in the cold night air of Louisville, Kentucky, my feet planted solidly on Earth, my mind on space and love. What if love is what happens when two worlds collide? Maybe, you fall in love because someone catches you as you are falling to Earth.

Even today, I continue to dream of falling—toward others now, though the distance does not lessen.