Venus, As It Might Have Been

*I am ready to fly without coming back.*
—Valentina Tereshkova, *Pravda*

July 22, 1972,
Valentina plummeted to Venus,
plunged through its poisonous vapors,
petrified, elated, alone.

Splashed down into the ocean,
eight years after *Venera 2*
had reported the rocking motion
when it descended into waves.

Afloat in her tiny pressurized vessel,
Valentina unfurled the Soviet pennant,
snapped the photo of the smile
that would supplant the Mona Lisa.

For three weeks she sailed
the sparkling seltzer seas,
studied the tentacled creatures
that swept past her windows.

Anguish, yes, when the air ran out.
But worth it to have gone first,
to have stepped toward the stars.
No last words. No final photo.

—Mary Soon Lee