

From *Ultiatum from Paradise*, 2014

White on White

after Kazimir Malevich

It's the sort of painting I could never stand—
a white square askew on a white background—

one more aesthetic incarnation
of that swindled emperor, naked again,

preening in his nonexistent clothes;
I'd lived in Florence—where painting breathes—

seen how inanimate materials
(gold beaten to dust, crushed-up jewels

mixed for rich and lasting color with albumen)
could be converted into pure emotion,

how master after master after master
had willed a chapel wall of fresh wet plaster

to make the ephemeral hold still
alongside the godly, the impalpable.

Why would you paint a white square askew
on a white background when you could go

anywhere at all, encompass anything?
If the world failed us, at least a painting

might offer us its aggregate of rapture.
I had a stake in this, longed to capture

a bit of it myself (though my materials
would be more modest, words instead of jewels)

or at least exhaust myself in the attempt;
I was a seasoned dreamer and I dreamt,

which sustained me for quite a number of years.
But even the most stubborn of dreamers

is forced to notice, sooner or later,
that the world understands itself without her

albeit flattering intrusion
and it's a meager place once illusion

in all its glory is exposed as sham.
Besides, I've squandered poem after poem.

Just think of all the treasure I've left stranded,
uncultivated, the unattended

but manifest allegiances in things,
how a presence, of its own accord, sings

right within my own field of vision
and I always fail to take it down:

the year the snow came late and the mountain
was suddenly a tour-de-force of ermine

white on the golden residue of aspens
(it's the winter slant of light that determines

the color of their fur and not the snow)
or a June hike—what?—fifteen years ago,

the mountainside a visual haiku:
five mountain goats on the last patch of snow

and I would leave them there, forgotten.
That is, until, by accident I wandered in-

to the wrong room at MOMA, turned around
to a white square askew on a white background

and there were my mountain goats on snow.
Kasimir Malevich had seen them too,

how white craves white, how what's askew
yearns for some congenial milieu

where it can lose itself, disappear.
Those stunning ermine that snowless year

were neon on the gold leaves' makeshift carpets,
thrilling to witness, but ideal targets

for even the most dull-eyed predator.
Better to secure a sound white square

however unremarkable, unsubtle.
A person has to settle for what's possible.

A white square on a white background, askew.
Five mountain goats on the last patch of snow.