Two Poems
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In Memory of the Space Shuttle Atlantis
3 October 1985–21 July 2011

Snub-nosed, hot-tiled, squared-off and four-eyed,
the best we could do for a while,
you were, above all, determined to be of use:

designed to go in circles, and to lead
one human being at a time
to the end of a well-made tether.

Able to punch your weight
in water vapor, you knew
that doing something must be better for us

than doing nothing all the time, and that nothing
compares to the silence of infinite space:
you also knew you’d never go that far.

You toted a lens, and six gyroscopes,
and another lens, and alfalfa threads that thrive
in microgravity with symbiotes,

and botanists and maintenance specialists,
and then a thirteen-mile polymer rope,
as if to show with how

much distance from the previously realistic
not reason, but our resources,
could cope . . .

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After the great round lights in the night sky
were done with you, you had your one
last hour in the blue, your compromise

between economy and perseverance
still clear in your blunted curves, forever unable
to swoop, much less soar

any more, but still inclined—
our most insistent
incrementalist—to serve

such things you could not want to leave behind.
Over Atlanta

It seems to you—others who have already gathered evidence may differ—that the rollercoaster of the future is not really a rollercoaster, since you do not just get off and pick up where you left off. While it can be permanently disorienting, or over-stimulating, it only simulates—exhilaratingly, if you are ready for its enticements—mortal peril; once you get on, having tested the restraints to see what fits, you are nearly prepared (no one is ever truly prepared) to discover the sweep of its arcs, which begin with vertigo, and continue with downward torque, creating a wind strong enough to undo long hair. Hold on to your person’s hand. That person may be new to you. The pure air at the top of the initial rise, where Castor and Pollux, Sirius and the transitory moon saunter, throwing their light across your shoulders, is something you have never breathed, a kind of volatility, a series of buoyancies, as in a glare-proof, lighter-than-nitrogen observatory, a dome that may deliquesce or wobble once you begin to descend.
Your inner ear,
unused to the novel phenomena, may confuse
you even as your astonished face—wide-eyed,
mouth slightly parted—attracts the others
on the ground and in the queue, who can now see you,
gathered as they are along the wire
that separates the aisles from the staff-only door.

As you wait to get back on, you may acquire
the temporary sense that there must be a driver,
able to redirect or even master
constructions like these, once in motion. No one has ever
seen one, if one exists. The phosphor
aura, the whoosh and dash, the feather
or featherblade shadows from cars on their casters, whose cast
shapes climb the pendulum and tower
of the adjacent pirate ship, and whose lighter,
higher, pinker counterparts attach their
shades to the undersides
of the night’s few earliest clouds, may frighten
you, or you might see them as reminders;
you chose to be here. You are one of the night’s lucky riders.

The friends who came here with you may feel like spotters,
as if they stood below the uneven bar
around which you started to fly, then performed deft reversals
along the entire half-invisible structure,
as if you could see the net
or lattice of care and attention and bodily pleasure
that holds the universe up, or keeps it together,
against the laws of physics that would rather
see you drop. But you will
not drop. The straps will not let you
although there is, still, no cover,
no hood, no canopy, only acceleration,
no hood, no canopy, only the atmosphere
and some sort of stopping point. Keep holding
hands with your person, or else hold hands with more
than one person. You are not there yet.