

Two Poems

STEPHANIE BURT

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 . . .

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 near-
 ly 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.