

Space Pod

The morning my biology teacher lands the Space Pod
it's impossible not to imagine tree rings –
wet black counters, or formaldehyde taste –
empty pigs with radial tongues stuck out as if to say
hold still, we're expanding.

My father stands motionless around backing vehicles
in orbit, and I've always meant to walk like that:
a wooden fragment of fence, slight leaning,
no longer trying to keep anything in.

When I was fifteen my father fixed the car
for me, so we named the Space Pod for its lights, shape.
Neon red in square radio digits, gas gauge flushing
a salvaged scrap of light and metal, maybe time.

As in melted candy, searing seatbelts, an era –
smell of trees and sleeping farm animals.
My father fixes cars, so customers launch the Space Pod
when their regular cars fail. A tradeoff:
single shed gum wrappers for my scraps.

A marker powders my teacher's fingers grainy black
like cosmic dust. A real piece 'a you-know-what
he winks, as if this joke could be shared like
a borrowed car, and from the back row
I consider somewhat privately
that we are not all cut out of wood.

A joke from our universe (which is really a microverse)

They laugh until laughing makes them kiss.

They kiss until kissing makes them laugh.

– Sarah Ruhl

Jokes

Q. What becomes of our skin
after a day in the rain? Is this when
we sink?

A. No one
knows what becomes
of us, except to say that soon
science may control the weather
and in that case the rain
will fall at once, in flood.

Our skin becomes glass.

Q. What are we to the ones
who came before?

A. Giant

Q. I tripped while stepping down
a log and rolled exactly sixty-two times.
Which way is back?

A. The only way to prove direction
is to trace your hand down the back
of someone who reminds you
of you and feel for truth
to prickle. If there are fish,
they may jump
to tell you.

Jokes without punchlines

Q. We are delighted to find children
naïve, but is the idea of a tooth fairy
really stranger
than the existence
of dinosaurs?

Q. The time I wanted

to be a doctor

Q. Were people with near-death
experiences once affected
by the stories
of near-death experiences? What of
their mothers?

Q. Me
a doctor

Punchlines without jokes

A. Snoring does not sound
like the letter z. Marriage
sounds hard.

A. Flooding – a familial storm
how could
you leave?

A. My mother takes care
of the very old and very young,
neither of whom
can remember she does this.

A. Me
giant

Potluck

My mother and I sit at the kitchen counter eating
tomato sandwiches filled with dirt – silence –
as though we are for the moment
next-door neighbors, sharing a ten-minute lunch lull
before returning to our sovereign driveways,
the dry leaves in barrels to burn,
acid-wash watering cans, sweet flavor of ash wafting
through our crop top pine border, each kneeling
in muddy pants and wishing as we work
for thicker grass or sidewalks clean
of orange chalk and power tools, separate lives
merging from the same street sign.
We are drinking tea now. From my side
of the street I hear
the swimming, the blow-up pool bodies aching
to stretch like an indie song. A puddle
of mascara forms a worm in my eye.
In a minute, we will return to work
dumping our crumbs in the yard, and
what the birds don't take will follow
us home tonight. Some mothers
sit in their kitchens with no past, no sounds,
chests split like a broken drum. When I rock
in my chair – refilling her glass and mine –
our tongues become young trees. Our glasses
feel like wet shovels.

Stage Directions for the Four Last Things

I. Death

Walking, she begins to write a letter.
There is no paper. She is not confused
but her eyes wish she could scrawl
more faces than names. Her hair
shines blue in the light.

II. Judgement

When she reads the letter aloud, it
sounds more like a song. Her voice is
pleased, then frustrated.

She throws the letter into the sky,
like a frantic dove. It floats there.

III. Hell

She does not know how to send it
home.

IV. Heaven

She lies on the floor and blinks into
the blue.

Above, the letter flies. She begins
to breathe.

The Doppler Effect

My buzz brother – his own head
 surgical scar above his ear
 Pigeon Creek calls for
 newspaper rot, flat water
 other things we don't want.
 Once, I raked a disintegrate path like a bat
 through the woods
 where hair regenerates.

Brother, advise me: excellence is habit
 you say an R&B singer
 which isn't an R&B singer but Aristotle
 cold feet – the basement at night – is everyone
 almost alone?

College notebooks wide-ruled freshman year
 Talk to the phone
 or use my tongue if you need it,
 drop of voice three minutes,
 buzzer pitching down
 a curved skull.

I wind the cord
 solid fingers tangle bound
 tie it up and shut it down
 dissonant song yanking its end
 which is a tree.

Three last name boys were a switch let's
 gather wet slabs of wood
 pound into a tree dial tone throb
 like a single bone
 till something starts to sound.
 Can I crystallize
 into a beat?

In high school, passing geometry
 whatever problems
 I couldn't understand but older now
 please grow it out.
 Your little finger gnarled bump
 curling years
 Piano echo soft hammer even
 now uneven
 clumps.

How to sing a dying song

If I show you the concrete where I broke my skin on a pickle jar, I'd rather show you a bone – intangibly inward – so thank you for seeing it that way. But how can we feel an old song before it's forgotten, or how others drift into places other than mortality? With the advent of the gun, verbal combat replaced swords on the stage, shots too quick and sure for our lust. What does this say for Hedda's pistols? The people who love me sometimes wish I would scream. I prefer swordplay. Every friend I have learned to know has opened for me a poster-plastered bedroom, tired curtains and tokens of childhood. A perfectly-balanced blend of nostalgia and despair. Is this how we want to see one another? One of my regrets is that I can't hang up an undesired phone call. There's no virtuosity in recalled voices, aimless shots. Can you entrust the perception without experience? It's said that the swan sings a delicate song before dying, a final gesture of love suspended in the ear, but I always forget that I am singing.

Moon Floats

Your hand turned telescope catches the moon, laughs –
the banality of the punch, hunched forward like a fishtail.

I forget the last time I felt truly anomalous
except frisbee, so please stop trying to make me enjoy it.

Let's be clear. What I want most out of this
is an electric outlet.

The gnarled knot in the tree outside my building looks exactly
like an old dog, and I can so easily imagine dancing
with you.

This is what I mean by currents.

I overslept today and my impulse was to blame the window
for not waiting for morning.

When we walk home you point to the moon so I
pretend not to understand refractions of light.

I dread the time it takes for you to know
that I never liked swimming.

In the driveway my father sits smoking
how I first learned to breathe.

You dream casually of highways looming in air but how
then can I look up, on Saturdays with grass, and sigh?

I'm not withholding, just letting you filter
like cold fog, or smoke.

At night, I lie on my bed and repeat every word aloud, submerged
as in water, and even then I can't remember everything.