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Riding Parallels

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In fifty-three years I have only seen one sunset. The one before it whispered quiet insurrection to me, hushing the words as it drowned over the horizon that I never needed to see a velvet and cold night again. I knew, from then on, I would never have a sleepless night. Never wake in the darkest moments of the smallest hours wondering why there was no longer anyone lying next to me to warm or comfort. Never wake with a sense of encroaching blackness or crushing silence. Never again would I cry for the sun to climb over the earth and drench me in its warm salvation.

I knew it was time to go because the world would be different in the sky. Safer. In the clouds, there were no drunk-driven cars that robbed men of their wives. No politicians willing to lie or cheat to get votes or money. In the sky, there were no war machines or war bonds or war widows.

The morning after my final night, I rose to a windy dawn and spent the day preparing with the paternal air gusting under my arms and feet, lifting and pushing me towards the blue maternal overhead. I went to work putting the finishing touches on the balloon, white patchwork with yellow stitching—an industrious combination of material that felt impenetrable. I weaved the final bits of wicker into my enormous basket, packed the stacks and stacks of dry food, the gallons of water, and my fishing rod, complete with balls of bread for bait. I brought my heaps of

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Riding Parallels

*Tyler Smith*
empty journals, my maps, my spools of thread, my gramophone, and my Billie Holiday.

I left the earth and I headed west. It has been 7:48 in my evening ever since.

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I have counted fifty-three New Year celebrations since my balloon began carrying me towards the horizon. I’ve chased the sun through silver clouds, through rain and snow, above pastures, over oceans, the sky on fire all along. I’ve sat atop my wicker home and watched the earth flow beneath me like a treadmill scene of houses and farms and trees and water. From miles above I’ve watched my round shadow thrown down on the landscapes below, a black circle worlds away but a constituent shadow of heartbeats, heartaches, and aspirations: an everything within a negative.

It used to be so beautiful and indescribably pristine—like sashaying through an oil-paint rendition of atmosphere, where the clouds would sizzle away while the children ran home to loving families, their tiny hands pointing at the color in the sky.

The balloon drifted, carrying its cargo over rooftops, past chimneys spiraling up tendrils of smoke, past the noises in the cities that grew.

The geese flew in perfect form over the water, calling at one another in some language or code that I could never understand, and I would try to imagine what they were saying, if the stories they told resembled anything we told each other. If their simple honks and squawks somehow captured the words we could never find. My bread-baited line would spool down, waiting for one of the birds to take hold, and they’d dance around the strange source of food, this new and interesting thing, before latching on. I would pull them up to me, their lost feathers spiraling down and away, falling to the sea as if to leave reminders of a world above.

I fished for the angels that would keep me alive.

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I would sit for hours, staring into my maps and getting lost in their paper landscapes. I loved the way the world could be transcribed, taken out of three dimensions and put into two.
It was the ideal world: perfect and without turmoil. Did the first mapmakers see the world like this? A world, both tangible and impossible, existing on paper with ink lines and dotted boundaries, then opening like a canvas infinitum?

I was swimming miles deep in cartography when the wind snuck around me, pulling at the maps and threatening to send them flying away. And when I saw the woman for the first time, one almost did.

Time gets hazy in the sky, but I know I saw her before my first New Year. I remember Billie Holiday was crackling and popping about waiting until the real thing came along when the map went curling up, spinning my stomach to knots.

*If that isn’t love, it will have to do, until the real thing comes along...*

Billie crooned.

My fingers closed around the map just as it flitted over the edge of the basket, and when I looked beyond my hand holding the tattered paper, I saw her green balloon heading towards me.

*I’d gladly move the Earth for you, to prove my love, dear, and its worth for you...*

She was staring at me with the same bewildered fascination when she smiled. It was forever ago, but I did too. She was heading east when she passed within thirty feet of me, waving a gloved hand that cut through the clouds and looking at me with fractured blue eyes under tightly curled golden hair.

I watched her hurdle towards the darkening sky, a green teardrop getting smaller and smaller until I couldn’t see her at all. She was headed for the moon, a translucent white crisp in the sky that never quite broke through my atmosphere.

*I’d sigh for you, I’d cry for you, I’d tear the stars from the sky for you...*

I wouldn’t see the woman in the green balloon again for a long time. Over the years, I only saw her a handful of times. Sometimes close enough that I thought I might be able to smell her perfume floating toward me on some invisible lilac spiral. Other times, I only saw her gliding along the edge of the world. And I believe she saw me too.
Fifty-three years is a long time. A lot of time for challenges, and a lot of time for things to change. Balloons don’t last forever, not without maintenance and upkeep. I hadn’t taken into account that when, on the few occasions I would need to stop for supplies, I would have to worry about all of the sharp edges the world still had.

The first time I landed, in a field of billowing ghosts near a Peruvian town just south of the Columbian border, a weather vane shaped like a rooster tore a patch of white from my balloon. With panic threatening to explode in my chest, I was sure I would lose my light. I cursed the weather vane that jutted from the roof of the anonymous brick monolith.

I rushed to gather all the flapping sheets I could manage off of the nearest clothesline. I threw them into my basket, and the fact that they were all a uniform gray escaped me. I managed to patch the hole before the sky inked over.

As I drifted up to the blue, I watched the weather vane lower through my field of vision. A small tear of white dancing from the end of it, situated atop a hospital.

I flew on, restless to make up for lost time and to continue chasing the horizon.

From then on, when the balloon tore, I patched it with the dark hospital sheets. Over time, the patches worked their way in until there was as much gray as there was white.

During those fifty-three years the world changed. I imagine there was a lot of political strife and a lot of people died in a lot of wars. People likely took years to starve to death and many were probably treated as though they weren’t quite human. I know the air changed. Certain places became so clouded and thick with chemicals that, for a while, the sun was just a brilliant blur, a white nexus in the fog. Now the world is just so loud. I hear sirens and watch the flashing reds and blues. This is why I float ever on. It’s a world of permanent night down below: a world that exists in either chaos or controlled violence.

After fifty-three years, the birds and I don’t speak as much as we once did. Their formation no longer means Vindication or Virgil or Valhala. Now it only reads Vengeance, Violence, and Vanguard—an arrowhead made of living things.
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For all these years I’ve floated along in my balloon that is now almost completely gray, and I ache. I hate that ache. I feel sunburned, like my body is permanently red followed by deep tan, followed by a pale, dead-bone white.

The world is not a beautiful thing anymore. I’ve lived for the sun and the birds and water, and it turns out they are just more of the same. The sun will burn you, the birds will ground you, and the water will fill your lungs.

There are times when I think I can see the stars trying to struggle through—an audience hidden in the ether, just out of sight, begging just to be seen or acknowledged. Part of me really does want to embrace that infinity. I tell the wind this. I tell it that, sometimes, I dream about lowering myself down until I’m only a few feet above the glassy water. I dream that I just hover there, waiting out the last few minutes until the world turns full dark and the sky fills so completely with stars that I breathe them in like dust floating in the sunlight.

It’s when I think I can see the stars that my mind drifts towards the woman in the green balloon. That woman who must be a thousand years older because she chases her days down, tearing after each sunrise, blurring day into night into day, perhaps fearing the dark, but perhaps embracing it and maybe our scar-tissue maps tell the same story.

I crank up the battered old gramophone and put my Billie on, and behind me the gunmetal sky meets the dark water.

I’d lie for you, I’d cry for you...

In front of me the sun sits half submerged in the sea, reflecting itself off the shimmering horizon, looking complete and shimmering in full circle.

Until the real thing comes along...

The record crackles and I close my eyes, letting the reddish-black, the only dark I know, creep over me. The sea breeze whispers into my ear in a language I still don’t understand, and I imagine it telling me a story about a woman in a still-green balloon. One who rides the same wind as I do.