

Blue Balloon in White Pine

It's the blue of hot metal against the damp blue of sky, a flutter in the white pine, a bright tatter high up. When it catches the sun, it hurts my eyes. If I angle one way, I can block it with branches; if I shift back in my chair, there it is again, sudden and sharp as a paper cut.

It could be beautiful the way the scrap lifts as the branches lift – how anything light proves the existence of wind. Because, look, the breeze nudges and plays -- and am I not playful? Have I not trained all my life to see the brief gestures of least things in their fullness? To be moved by the wind's caress? Rearranged by words whispered into my hair? And if the world is not what I make it, haven't I tried to make what I see? To make myself more and more seen?

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Mylar is made from plastic sheets thinly coated in layers of metal. At NASA it's used to protect space crafts, satellites, and astronauts from extreme heat and cold. A mylar balloon protects itself well – so well it resists its own end; no element scours it back to essentials, it partakes in no cycle and fruits forth nothing but micro-scrap which hold onto their chemicals forever. In the ocean where most end up, balloons imitate jellyfish and are swallowed by turtles and fish, who starve while feeling their stomachs are full. Floating in air, balloon bouquets tangle in the wings of birds, snag in powerlines, causing outages and fires.

Intended for one time use, balloons accompany the saying of a thing, or act as the saying itself; because a human isn't good at speaking to joy or birth, regret or remembrance, a balloon steps in. Fronts for feeling. As lawns do nothing but *green-&-neat*, a form of beauty called The Dream - whose maintenance requires a poisonous mix of gas, fertilizer, ear splitting noise from mowers and blowers. Lawns sequester no carbon, wreck watersheds, support no pollinators and are part of no food web. And still, the aesthetics of lawns and balloons override the ruin they bring.

That is, cliches are a problem of ecology. Habits of seeing make it hard to imagine things differently, like, say, the awfulness of cut flowers -- not clipped from a garden or gathered roadside, but the usual stun of a dozen red roses: flown in from Equador or Columbia, they travel thousands of miles in refrigerated cargoholds, then long haul trucks to reach us. And if cultivated here, the pesticide run off is especially intense because flowers are not food (well, not for us) and so not subject to the same regulation.

Flowers as love, apology, promise. Wreathed into mourning. Pinned to lapels. It's that tropes stunt the ability to roam. To see instead the hospitality of weeds, that a fattened, purple, roadside thistle is hardy and flagrant and ever-giving, and, like the most authentic among us, self-seeded, persistent, prickly around the edges.

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An aesthetic is built by years. School. The streets. Asides. Friends. Ethics. Science. The land. Family. Big Dreams. Drive. Privilege, or the absence of. Repeated suggestion over a period of

time, masquerading as Personal Choice. One could say, if untethered from the canon of respectability, that maggots are beautiful, passing in slow waves over the wild dead -- deer or mouse, any of us who return to the earth with their help; maggots, who cause no one's death, but take in, turn over, transform our bodies and create fertile ground so we might eat. Who work with air, light, and their own hunger to make us more than we ever dreamed we could be, more and en route, part of and unfinished. Who teach the beauty of us in the cycle, that it leads to an end that isn't an end. Who were born to keep up with our dying, and help us to exchange our small selves for a whole.

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This balloon's been stuck here for over a year. Tender, new green still translucens in sun, and needles glitter down in wind. The sight of it there, the wrongness burns like a sudden shame, brief as a wince, that micro dose of agony. If a wince was extended, one couldn't live. The brightness would blind, the piercing not end. A wince is a warning, like any one of Bosch's suffering, 15th century human creatures, writhing in hell, their jagged eggshell bodies, bent-beaked and rat-faced, suffering the sins they committed on earth: the gluttonous forced and vomiting eternally, the eyes of the jealous gouged by arrows; the lustful clergy stripped and gnawed everafter by hungry toads

And what about any vision of relief? When the wind dies down and the blue scrap goes limp -- is that relief? Or simply evidence hidden from sight, as it is when the violence of any system's fully integrated into our days. Say, the workings of a factory farm, the burning and breaking and crowding and crushing kept far from the table, except now it's so easy to know

everything -- call it up, type it in, it's all right here -- and nowhere is safe from knowing if you choose to know.

I often overwhelm myself. It's hard to stop slamming all the likeness together, associating quickly and clumsily: balloons, lawns, cut flowers, factory farms. For now, right here, I'll let the urgency override the making of a more perfect thing.

And yes, I know, I don't *have* to keep looking at the scrap in the tree – but a groove's been worn in my musculature and my eye rides up to that spot of sky. That my eye's been drawn to this precise place is clear to me now, the way losing your watch reveals how often you check the time. There's no rest to be had in looking up, wincing, and looking away. No rest in avoiding the spot either.

And the pain of finding no rest is what? Wandering. Exile. Homelessness. To have no spot to recover en route, to be forced to keep moving is a fraught migration. It's like -- here I go again – being a bird whose starry map is erased by the all-night lights of cities. Or, like being a coyote in Baltimore. How beautiful he was, brown-grey and shining that late afternoon, jumping the ditch, skirting the stand of cattails and ragweed –a spasm of brightness, then everything dimmed. A coyote in a pocket of green running along an urban creek, doesn't belong. (I tried an adjustment in my hope-bent way towards “adaptation” – Great! Coyotes will keep down the rats - but that felt like, when you're sick, shifting in bed to alleviate an ache; things are better for a second, until the pain takes up in a different spot and you have to move again. And again. Nothing helps. And it's impossible to sleep.)

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Once there was a sky-filled clearing. In a gap between branches, blue once breathed.

I did not know it was the dependable sky that so deepened my sense of being alive.

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CODA, Mid-June 2023: For the past week, the sky been clotted with smoke from Canadian wild fires. The sun burns through, but the blue's just a hint. Under the haze, a whisper of color. The blue can hardly catch its breath. It's there because I know it's there and so my looking follows my knowing. Memory eases some of the grief. After a few days, some patches thin, suggesting the sky might continue to clear.

Imagine the generations to come who won't see this blue, or even sense it behind the smoke.

The stories we'll tell them about the sky: those entire, vast, deep days of blue. Blue like nothing they've ever known so we'll have to say what it was like: a promise kept; a lasting peace. And the variations: jay-feather soft (if there are jays); dark slate, brittle, ice-filled blue. Cornsilk, plum, and fire-streaked. Bell-struck loud. Arterial. Color so shocking we gasped every time, though the blue was with us every day, we who grew up with the sky in our songs, our sayings, our physics, our scriptures.

And the phrase *Isn't it a beautiful day?*, what we used to say so simply in passing, we'll have to replace it with *See the sky trying?*

The sky trying.

Such tenderness there.

We could teach the kids to see that.