

Ballast: Poems

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I. The Opposite of Orpheus

“What may not be expected in a country of eternal light?”

Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*

Ascent

“Someone asked me—what’s the use of a balloon? I replied—what’s the use of a newborn baby?” – Benjamin Franklin

I.

Dear Gentlemen and Ladies, Children
and Children in wait, allow me
to present you the Future. Does it not
look much more than some Organ
on the operating theater Floor,
sides heavy-heaving with Bloat
and Distention? But this is the End
of our Tether, I tell you, this,
the bright June of our Tenure here—
this, our salvation Weather.

II.

Everything weighed, even
the women, each pastry crumb and drop
of brandy justified. We bring nothing
we can’t afford to buy again. We are
a basketful of ballast. If a man tries to steal
another’s compass, or silk, or shoes,
he is a criminal, locked down
with only blue-veined bread mold
to remind him of sky. But when the air
flashes its heavy, iron muzzle
we freely offer what we might have died for,
were our feet already grounded.
Our minds are changed—now,
what matters most is heat and light,
bright urgencies caught up
in our half-tamed ball of sky.

III.

Seven miles up, the world
reveals itself round: slow cusp
of green. The clouds collect
around our necks and drop
their eyes even as ours rise
in a rush of desire. Why hold
out hope for home
when we feel so near
to somewhere else? The sky
gets clearer as we climb,
the air unbreathed by any
before. It seems no force
restrains us, no lock
bars the door.

IV.

Now we pray to the drowned
boy-god, his feathers
beaded with salt pearls,
his eyes white
as breakers. We measure
the sky electric, we give
to clouds the names
his children might have borne,
we look down only
when we must. And
it is not enough. His anger
hitches fingers up
through the wicker, makes us
feel our weight until
the spray soaks our faces
and we have no name
for the jump we take, so we still
must call it *overboard*.

Balloon for the Everyman

No more the cabriolet, domestic
dirt on his wife's skirt's hem, the horse

half-asleep and bitter. No more
whip-cracks and slickened slabs

of cobblestone, the city a half-finished
maze of smoke and noise.

Mornings, he widens his bedroom
window into a door, steps out

on the sun-warm roof and
catches his new carriage

on its way over the neighbors'
low chimney, last night's embers

fizzing in and out like fireflies

between his fingers. His wife watches
as he clears the clock tower. Worried, she waves

as he is swallowed by cloud— he will
be late, again— the moon's crêpe de Chine

shadow, suspended
just beyond his reach.

Balloon-Breasted Girls

Elated, inflated, the swift tick
and sway—who could blame
us for falling up to love? It's just

the weather is better with
girls who could never quite
keep their feet on the ground,

who lead us aloft, sun-eyed and star-
tied, their waists the only place
to hold on. Higher than

hydrogen, the sirens carry us,
courseless, remorseless,
we want them more for it.

No corsets, no stays, only
volatile haze as their skirts drift
with the vertical tide,

it's a freewheeling flight, a pure
spiritual heist, not to mention
they're hollow inside.

The Dinner Party

After hours of hand-roughing work,
hot water, stubborn earth,
she realizes she has forgotten
to dust the study
only when he starts the story
she begged him not to tell.

Unseen sabotage, cut
lines, ten thousand feet
of rapid rise
and fall—she finds herself
busy in the dusk, a scrap
of cotton shirt in hand.

How terrible, she hears
in a woman's voice whose tone
suggests the opposite. She turns
to the small gold frame
on the far wall, studies its
perspective on the storm

at sea. The world is cloud
and swirl, colors unmoored
from their contexts—
her eye is grateful
to find the ship's
thin copper border.

How brilliant, from
far behind her, and she balances
the painting, tips it
a little farther left.
Yes, it was, her husband
replies, and she tucks

the rag into a drawer,
turning back as she leaves
to make sure it's out of sight.

Prism

“The love of liberty so natural to a prisoner gave rise to many projects to release myself from the rigorous detention. To surprise the vigilance of the sentries, force walls 10 feet thick, throw myself from the ramparts without being injured, were schemes that afforded recreation.” – André-Jacques Garnerin, Official Aeronaut of France, 1797

To look at one color and its dulled moods
all afternoon, to stare
until stones seem burned

into brain, pressing their mark
even in sleep:
dream-worlds overlaid

with fissure and rift. To wake each day,
mouth thick with cold
soil, teeth plaqued

in iron taste. To wait
for a day as far away
as death, and buried as deep.

A little earth seeps in after a long rain.
And through this
the promise of blue.

The Balloonist's Wife

I. Fulmineous: Concerning Thunder

He pushed our bed beneath the window
to better study the migration of clouds,

which sounded romantic
until the first summer rain polluted

our sleep. Droplets turned
into a river beneath the earth, my mouth

pressed to the thin, stale slice of air
not yet filled.

Later, spare sheet tacked up with pins,
I asked him what he'd dreamed, expecting

some sky-tilted scene. *Fire*, he said,
I watched the world consume itself, and when

*it finally began to rain, each drop steamed
to nothing before it reached the ground.*

II. Blackthorn Winter: a Fresh Cold in Spring

It took me some time
to realize that when
he stared at women's skirts,
it was not for the reasons
my mother had advised me to fear.

And when he fell asleep
at his desk, it was not
my fault, but I should not
let the candles drip
onto his pages.

When he climbed out
to the roof, I was not to get
hysterical, I was to take down

his dictation—weather,
wind, temperature,
pressure in the air.

In the margins, I kept
my own record of birds
and the nests I could

see from our window,
what material they used, how
long they lasted through the storms.

I tainted my experiments
with offerings of gingham,
spare bright shreds

left out, as if by accident,
on the nearest sill.

III. Deliquium: a Failure of Light, as in an Eclipse

He stopped me in the street, asked
to borrow my umbrella.

For a prototype, he said, voice
conspiratorial, fingers

already unlacing ribbons
at the canopy's edge.

We stood, steady as stones.
My mother kept

shopping, her face flashing
in the window

like intermittent gunfire.
He did not look up

until I asked him who he was.
I fly balloons—

or, I will. I asked him why
he needed my umbrella.

In case of emergency,
the corners of his mouth

folding the words
into a joke, and

I laughed because
already I wanted

to believe him.

IV. Plenum and Vacuum (Body and Space)

He died
a hundred ways.
All the elements

combined in all
the forms I could find,
drawn up in books

and sketched
by my own mind's terror.
Here, the grapple line

snags on a chimney,
his body pitched
into air—here,

he is blown into
the Channel,
drowned in brine

and alone—here,
the envelope tears
above him

in a surge of reports
more metal than silk,
and he records

each gash, its length
and location, on
his way down.

V. Beasts of Venerly

When my father brought
back the bodies
he had shot
in early morning,
leaf-brown hide interrupted
in one small circle that
seemed to expand
the longer I stared, the hole
surrounded
by a dusting of light
powder, as if a stupid girl
had tried to cover it
with makeup,
its legs unyielding as if
still trying—
he boasted
no earthly thing
could escape him.

VI. *Weather-gleam*

The first term he taught me
was *ballast*. It is impossible
to know at the desk, grounded

by receipts and calculations,
what will prove itself
invaluable, and what

will be pure weight.
After reading of a man
who dropped his compass

and landed speaking English
to German *Kleinbauern*,
we loaded the basket

according to a system
I designed: A pair of boxes,
round-backed and lattice-woven

in thin strips of the lightest
wood I could find,
tops unlatched. The one

nearest the door, most
expendable, contains what would
have been essentials five thousand feet

below: brandy, cheese, bread, a jacket,
hat, loose fabric, leather gloves.
Opposite, another box

with experimental instruments—
speaking trumpet, telescope,
a large notebook for sketches (the pencil

I tied with red string
to the binding), and more—
useful, to be sure, but heavy,

replaceable. The compass,
barometer, and map are fastened
by long, braided twine

to the wicker itself. He keeps
a knife in his left pants pocket, lets

the blade shine a signal

a few minutes into each ascent.

The reflected light lies
flickering at my feet.

VII. A Snithing Wind

My mother taught me that to love a thing
requires fear. Each movement,
she counseled, should be studied

for signs of flight. If necessary,
take measures—glass, wire, thin
breakable bones—to stay disaster.

She held her body like a killing jar.
She pinned my father up as if he were
a beetle she admired. She loved the look
of linen, how it made brilliant every fault.

VIII. *The Torsion of Orbit*

My friend's teacup drips into her lap,
weak brown flecks

as if the dirt has reached up and
tapped her, pulled at her skirts

for attention. She does not notice—
she is crying. Her husband has flown

the coop, left for Paris with
her. She grabs my hand,

squeezes it until she shakes
with effort, as if she would

hurt me, if she could. She wants
advice, she wants a little

music, the slow violin
of consolation. I think

but do not say how easily
she could find him, follow him,

catch him speaking fumbling French
to a patient waiter as he orders

whatever you want, love. Anything.
She could walk, picking across

sun-cracked brick, her feet reaching sure
purchase on places worn smooth.

She could touch him.
His back, his jacket cuff.

She could make him turn around.

The Balloonist, Above the Clouds

A line invisible
to us—
our limit. Beyond,
air so light
we cannot draw it in.

Breaths strewn:
a dusting of snow
on the blue ground.
My words,
gasps of thin vapor

that dissipate, turn
to rain as I speak them.
It is hard to imagine
anything above me
but void.

If a man
ascends in pursuit
of a god, he
should build
a telescope instead.

II. The Daughter

“These joys were so small that they could not be seen, like gold in the sand, and in her bad moments she saw only griefs, only sand; but there were also good moments when she saw only joys, only gold.”

Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*

The Rooms of my Life are Falling Away

I watch what is left of my father,
his keys, a faded shirt,
drift past
my mother's journals, heavy
with his name.
They jostle each other
like strangers.

So many boxes
like daytrip boats
float out beyond
the sliding wreck.

The kitchen cabinet doors
half-open in slits, filling
with saltwater and black,
blink once. I chose the tile
for its look of sand, but
now, grains in hand, I feel
how wrong I was.

I should be afraid
to see the furniture
afloat, the seams
already torn apart,
white batting
mingled with sea foam.

I should weep as the whole house
is carried out, as even
the littlest things that make up
a life, photos, notes,
a brush-clump of hair,
dart from windows,
swim down,
out of sight.

Taking Cerberus for a Walk

Who hasn't wished for three heads:
one to promise, one to punish,
one to look behind. No one would ever

mug me if I had three heads. Then again, no one
will mug me with Cerberus
on the leash. It's late, but he's whining

like he hasn't been out
in two thousand years,
so I stand in the mudroom,

fussing with the custom coat
I ordered— what a trial that was,
the tailor thinking it was for

some cheap costume, sewing it
from pink nylon and quick stitches.
I brought it back—*what, because he's from hell*

you think he never gets cold?
Outside, he's all armor and strut,
trying to catch three moths at once,

letting other dogs sniff him with awe
until their silent, shadowy owners
pull them away. Finally, he pees,

upraised leg counterbalanced
by a steeply cocked head
as he listens for a far-off dawn.

Instead, he hears the trash truck.
Its metal growl fills his ears
and each head takes turns,

at first, to howl back, but soon
their red-eyed fevers feed
each others' fear, and they

fill the neighborhood with separate songs
sent out in parallel
through the desolate air.

Abridged Family History

We made our money in lumber.
We were humble, drank liquor only
in the dark, and woke up cold
and early. Our art was accidental,
a furtive slip of mind. Sometimes
we reached for words and found only
a sheaf of fresh-felled timber
stacked neatly on the earth,
its future form hidden in the grain.

Inheritance

I am drinking with the financial adviser
in a bar by the river.
His silver pen

snags the napkin
while he counts. The brassed light
catches, flashes, burns out

in the mirror behind the liquor shelf.
He says I look like her,
but three shots have burned

the tremor from him,
smoothed the folds in his face,
and he is all focus now,

napkin pinned down
by finger and thumb. My eyes
crack open cufflinks and shear

his suit jacket lining
in search of—
Cleaning out her closet,

I found the necklace he gave her,
its flat pearls pure nacre,
shards of opaque white.

I'd wanted to wear it tonight,
I liked the way it felt against
my skin, the way it almost

blended in. Instead I keep it
neatly curled on the bar,
my hand cupped over it

like a trick, and if he touches
my fingers to guess,
I'll make it disappear.

On the Market

The thermostat batteries
had run out for the first time,
and the house was the same
as the winter outside.

I felt a need to introduce
myself, as if I'd intruded,
my key as valid as the one
uprooted from the planter.

Even the ghosts were gone.
The smudged rosebuds of fingerprints
were painted over, and the paint
left a lingering odor that wasn't

livable, would disappear
as soon as new bodies
took our places at the table,
let their lives fill up these rooms.

It was a beautiful place—

I'd wanted to say *lovely*,

but it was not that, anymore.
It was a three-bedroom ranch
on a corner lot, two-and-a-half
bath, basement unfinished.

Coming Back

I curl among the things
you left me, your rings
on all my fingers. I ration
your perfume, the bottle
nearly gone. I keep
your pages, untouched.
But even this
is not enough. I live
to find circles of your
hair, tangled
in the dark of pockets,
or notes you wrote
to remind yourself,
the kind that show
how easily you could
return—life was not
so large, so strange
that you couldn't,
even now, remember
to pick up dinner
on your way home.

On Adaptation

I make of my body
a ship, I tell you
I will take you
anywhere.

I tell you the ocean
runs from wherever
you stand, is swift
and endless.

How beautiful
the particular body,
the way the light
bends as if called

home, that harbor
that shines in use.

To lose sight of land
is considered progress

here. What are maps
to a blue-blank world.
You push hard,
palms against my back

and the shore falls
away. You tell me
the sea turtle
is lighter than she looks,

her broad shell a skim
of bone. She moves
as if she will never
lose her way.

where you are going
there is no water
deep enough to fear
or ford, the land—

the land is not the point.
I would have taken
any honest thing,
any bright coin

beneath my tongue
to trade for passage

I would have taken you
anywhere.

Underage at Maneater Beach

Stomach all cusp and gold,
I'm unmoored but close
to shore. Long oar-legs
dangle towards the water,

one not-really-a-waitress red toe
dips in, bright anchor,
a little friction
to slow me down.

In the boat, I am unfazed
by the waves'
unfeatured gleaming;
it is as good a home as any,

water asking
to be built up into rain.
How could I have known
to keep my eyes

half-open while I dozed,
to slip a glint
of sea-glass against my palm,
to set myself

as bait and hunter,
sprawling in wait,
white bikini a false flag.
My mother warned me

about men who would push
my boat out beyond return,
but she never told me
of a better way

to reach the far island, that
impossibly green breach
in the lonely horizon.

Night Music

My mother's morphine is sleeping
in my kitchen cabinet

beneath the sink, with all the other
things that scrub me clean.

Even in darkness, the teasing flash
of bottle green keeps me

burning. My little stash, I call it,
and turn each capsule mindlessly

behind my eye, like a strand
of rosary beads. I could find it

even groping along a dream, kneel
on the linoleum floor

and spill the pills out
into my palm.

I tell myself it wouldn't work
for me, my body is too full of

push and steady blood to let
one ounce of death

inside. I tell myself
I am impenetrable

and young, and to let pain seep from
my skin like fever-sweat

is the only way weakness gets in.
She taught me to carry

the soft sack of myself, its seams
loosely bound, and never

set it down. I should have known
when her own grip

began to slide, I should have seen
how lightly she walked

through the many subtle shades
of her own late afternoon,

her skin dappled with the blue
of some distant sun,

its faint gravity lifting her,
untethered,

from the world on which
I still stand, feet buried

like drought-desperate roots.

Minos, Who Knows Only Facts

If I were clever, I would offer
a riddle: what gate is broad
but suffers no exit?

Women say three times as many
words each day as men.
This holds true even after death.

Women speak more than men
speak more
than demons, who are eternal,

and who don't need words
any more than you need
to remember the sins of

a basket weaver from Phoenicia.
Still, I relate to the women:
arms crossed, newly

vestigial, their ancient language
of pain poured in a dark river
down my throat.

I've learned the worst words
in every earthly tongue—*please*
and *no* and *why*—

but I have not learned the way
to ask how you came to stand
here, shaking, as I point

to where your stream will stop,
which circle will dam you up
and never yield a crack.

Some people ask
if there is error here, and I say:
always.

Why Ghosts Don't Stick Around

You wake up, wasting
nothing, your hands
cupped tightly at the sink.

If there is light, it is
reflected from the streetlamps
up, up onto the slick black line

of the building that fills
your window. Your shower
is hot and cold in rhythmic

bursts, simple messages
from the anonymous
bodies above, below, beside you.

You get dressed. Sometimes
you eat a bland, tan thing, oatmeal
or granola, and leave the dish

for later. You do not think about
a soul. You do not make the bed
or wish that someone was there

to make it while you're gone. You
pause, door propped against
your hip, three pats against three pockets:

Keys. Wallet. Phone. The door falls shut
behind you, then— My mind can't see
the workings of a world

in which I have no part. What
do you do out there? How
do you do it without me?

Grief as a Highway that Starts in the Atlantic and Ends in the Pacific

No choice but to keep moving.
The engine's low-test lullaby
not the worst that could happen

in this red scrape of rust. I remember
no on-ramp, no green sign
like a beacon to save me

from rough back roads. The urn
has always taken up my shotgun seat,
belted in against a stop

I can't imagine—
I haven't seen another car,
nothing but eight lanes

of grey—and midden heaps,
a few each day.
How easy it would be

to leave you here, by the side
of this road whose end is so far off
it feels like God.

Arrayed with other strangers' things,
items treasured but
tied to the roof,

beloved, but not enough
to stop the car.

To the New Family at 24 Walker Street

Don't cut down the chokecherry.
It is almost spring, and when the weather warms
the blossoms press all through that
small square window-screen.

Its fever does not last, I know. It sprawls,
more shrub than anything, its ragged green
intrudes on the yard, must be pruned, snipped
lovingly on Sundays, but when

the sparrows learn to love it, each year anew,
their full, dull bodies are unopened buds
on the almond-scented branch, their beaks
built specially to bend around

each purpled berry. You can fill
your winter with waiting until
the surprise of petalwhite
replaces the snow. And yes,

the leaves are green with cyanide,
and the fruit bitter enough to strangle,
but the tree feels no grief, lets it stream
like sunlight through its patchy shade.

III. The Sky Lies Open, Let us Go that Way

“And,’ said the lady, ‘if you should lose each other as you go through the—the—I never can remember the name of that country—do not be afraid, but go on and on.’”

George MacDonald, *The Golden Key*

The Beauty, Safety, and Utility of the Machine

You all coddle your concern
as if it were your only child,
or a demon curled in your ear
who buzzes with the worst
breed of questions.

The world is unsafe,
full of forces far worse
than weather. Disease,
old age, they watch
from the ground,

their empty baskets
await your offerings
as soon as you land. Why not
let them starve
a little longer?

Balloons do not feel fear
as horses do (or men)—
the machine is pure.
It relies on the rider
to make it more or less.

Do not pretend to be
pettier than you are. Who
among you has not wished
to shove off from the dull
shores of this world.

Before

*A landing is a fall
cushioned by desire,*

I return
when she asks me
the difference.

I touch the slope
of her back and feel
the skin's marvel,

how tightly it holds,
how resistant it is
to the everyday.

The balloon, though
it seems alive, all fire
and breath, is quick

to yield. No instinct
guides it, no
desperation or love.

We have had this
discussion
before. She wishes

I would *take care*,
and my reply—
but it is too heavy!

does not make her laugh
this time. I offer
statistics—no more

than eight ascents
in a thousand will end
in fatality. She replies

with names, now
empty: Bittorf, the Blanchards,
Olivari, Rozier and Romain...

I remember, years ago,
shoving through the crowd
to see Rozier give his lecture

on gravity: standing
between two women
equally lovely, his heart

feels the pull of both
but eventually,
inexplicably, one's attraction

is stronger than the other.
He chooses without choosing.

On Throwing out Feathers

Every ounce counts, so toss them out,
along with the coat whose pockets they lined;
caught up in the float, they'll fill like a flag.
The crowd, watching mostly in hope

of calamity, will follow their flight through
the countryside, assuming the basket
has emptied, its pilot revealed as the trickster
or traitor they knew him to be.

Ballast

The following Inventory, with which I ascended, may be of Use to future Aironauts, to whom only it is addressed.

1. The Cable and Grapple are considered as Part of the Balloon.

It is not as peaceful as people
seem to think. Hydrogen
screams as it burns. I rely
on the same fabric
used to make summer gowns,
and if it tears
on a heeled boot, imagine
how it weathers a storm. I do not
claim this science is perfected. I bring
no one along. The gray sheep
below are no closer
to me than to the clouds. As we ascend,
the balloon changes its mind,
decides we should go south.

2. A portable Barometer, with a common Syphon or Bulb (purchased at Laufanne.)

We go south
for several hours,
silk and flesh
still rising,
steady-paced. I feel it
breathing, one slow
exhale. My barometer,
designed to measure
weather, not height, says
we are holding at change,
which sounds right.

3. *Mariner's Compass in a double Box, to be used when the Sun is intercepted from the View by Clouds, in order to discover whether the Balloon turns round.*

A sound right above
my head, like a swallow
snapping its neck,
like a wind god hitting
his wife, like a rope
released from its purpose—
the basket tilts hard
to one side.

4. *Two red Lead Pencils: each Pencil ready pointed at both Ends, to save Time and Trouble: preferable to Ink, which may be spilt or frozen. The Strokes with red Lead are not so easily obliterated, as when made with a black Lead Pencil.*

One half of the world is always dark, the rush of tide filling up
each pair of eyes—the earth submerged in black water so deep
it erases the seams between us. Can any ship
outsail that constant course? Nights, from my window, I see
for thousands of miles, which means I see nothing at all.

5. *Down, or small Feathers, to be loose in the Pocket, and thrown out, when enshrined in Clouds; or at any other Time, to shew the Rise or Fall of the Balloon.*

I see nothing
until it happens—
the lines, frayed
nearly through from the outside
in. I had no chance
to notice. The balloon is not
a collaboration
between an object
and its master.
It is force: everything
else is ballast, designed only
to slow it down. I reach up—
find space
for my grip
between skillful, useless
knots on
the upper frame— I
watch the basket
fall until it
disappears beneath
my dangling feet.

6. *A small sharp Knife pointed, and ready open, or which will open easily.*

I remember, months ago, dangling two thousand feet of Dutch twine, a canvas bag of sand at one end, my hands unspooling the other. The open ground, smoothed by distance, showed my round shadow back to me. I felt the thinness measured out through my fingers, watched almost half a mile disappear, and when the ground reached up and wrenched me to my knees, I let the last few inches go.

7. A boarded Map of the Country over which the Aironaut may be supposed to pass: the Back serving as a Table.

I do not let go:
although my body
feels heavy enough to drag
this whole contraption down,
the balloon disagrees. We rise,
we rise into cloud and I cannot
look down. The sheep
must be gone, it's nearing dark—
I imagine them steaming
in the low, close barn,
their rows of legs neat parallels
to the rough-packed dirt.

8. A few Yards of Twine, loose in the Pocket, to tye the Neck of the Balloon in descending.

The rough calculations I run,
panic coaxing me to round up, then down:
how long will the hydrogen
last? I stare hard into the canopy,
willing it to deflate, but when
we finally begin to sink,
I think of branches, church spires,
rivers—at least the air
is empty. But it is also lonely,
and I am tired, and I have
no say in where I go.

9. *The Prism and large Telescope were left, as too heavy. And the Sextant or Quadrant could not be procured in Time.*

“Before the landing, particular Care must be taken that the Weight of the Aironaut be sustained by grasping the Hands round the Opposite Sides of the upper Hoop; so that the Feet may not touch the Bottom of the Car. The knees should likewise be bent. Repeating the above at each Rebound of the Balloon, if any; the Aironaut will alight in the gentlest Manner: and probably the Balloon may act as a Parachute or Umbrella which alone will, at all times, ensure an easy descent.”

10. *No Horizon of the round Earth was seen during the Excursion: and it is presumed, that the circular Horizon is seldom visible, when the Balloon is at any considerable Height; the Accumulation of Vapour between the Eye and Horizon preventing it: tho’ such Vapour remains invisible to Spectators from below.*

In the last seconds of the descent, I thought of you, and all other knowledge fled from me. I realize now that nothing has changed, that death and its threats are empty in blessed retrospect. But that morning, as I left, you were still getting dressed, the day’s brightness almost a promise, and as I turned to close the bedroom door behind me, it was enough to see you also turn to watch me go, your body’s movement still quiet with the memory of sleep, one stocking forgotten in your hand.

Helios

“To be alone in a balloon at a height of fourteen or fifteen thousand feet is . . . to pass extraordinarily out of human things.”—H.G. Wells

Rising, then risen. The city laid out
like a set in a play, the river’s broad strokes
blue and gray through London’s crooked back.

We look out for our houses, swallowed
in the low rubble. Long cracks of streets
and black narrows receding,

the way we’d been living, undistinguished
from horses or the carriages they pulled.
City of ghosts, city of forces

invisible. What had we loved
about that riddled place? How could our gods
have hoped to find us, steeples

little higher than hedgerows, prayers sent
alone toward these frigid heights?
A limitation, earth curves down

and away. The solid dome of sky—
an invitation to take
the open jaw-trap

and break it.
As even sun sinks
beneath us, leaves us afloat
in astral glow, we see. We know.

The Balloonist, After

My sleep has, no doubt, improved.
I do not miss the way I pried her hands
from my shoulder each night
to stand and sneak, feet barely skimming the boards,

to the window. Behind me, she slept
fiercely, twisting the sheets into ropes
around her legs. Before me, stars like air
holes drilled through hard rock,

the unquiet city an exponential echo. I found
it difficult to wait. Each morning, wind
permitting, I floated a little farther
away, the air a little colder, a little cleaner,

the land below limned in blue.
Now—my nights are the trail ropes
that keep my days from drifting,
long, blank lines, and my dawns

touch down gently
when she wakes up, her body weighting
the bed. I live a life impossible to crash.
And I am happy.

But sometimes, on my walk home from work,
in the half-light, I trip up on the curb and feel, briefly—
weightless, as if
I might keep going. And I am happy in a different way.

End Notes

The title figures in **Balloon-Breasted Girls** are inspired by an element of the “balloonomania” that gripped France and England in the late eighteenth century. As Richard Holmes puts it in *The Age of Wonder*, among the many varieties of balloon memorabilia that appeared soon after Dr. Charles’s ground-breaking ascent in a hydrogen balloon in 1783 were “sexually suggestive cartoons. . . . the inevitable balloon-breasted girls lifted off their feet, monstrous aeronauts inflated by gas enemas, or ‘inflammable’ women carrying men off into the clouds.”

Section IV of **The Balloonist’s Wife** is titled after the Greek philosopher Democritus’s influential theory that the universe consists of an infinite number of indestructible, miniscule bodies (the *plenum*) moving in an infinite space (the *vacuum*), a system in which nothing is created or destroyed.

Section V of **The Balloonist’s Wife** is titled after the Scottish dialectical term for a clear sky at the edge of a dark horizon.

The title of the third section of the collection, **Surely the Sky is Open, Let us Go that Way**, is borrowed from a line of Ovid’s retelling of the Daedalus and Icarus myth in the *Metamorphoses*; the original, in Latin “caelum certe patet; ibimus illac,” was emblazoned on a balloon created specially to carry three men over the English channel in the first overnight voyage. The men travelled 480 miles in eighteen hours; the details of the feat are in Monck Mason’s first-person account of their journey, *Aeronautica*, published in 1838.

The section titles and italic text in **Ballast** is taken from Thomas Baldwin’s 1785 account of his balloon voyage, *Aeropedia*. In addition to the entries I included in this work, Baldwin claims he also brought along “a live pigeon, in a small Basket of Matting” and “Pepper, Salt, and Ginger, to try the effects of tastes.”