You’ve seen Balloons set—Haven’t You?

So stately they ascend—

It is as Swans—discarded You

For Duties Diamond—

Their Liquid Feet go softly out

Upon a Sea of Blonde—

They spurn the Air, as ’twere too mean

For Creatures so renowned—

Their Ribbons just beyond the eye—

They struggle—some—for Breath—

And yet the Crowd applaud, below—

They would not encore—Death—

The Gilded Creature strains—and spins—

Trips frantic in a Tree

Tears open her imperial Veins—

And tumbles in the Sea—

The Crowd—retire with an Oath—

The Dust in Streets—go down—

And Clerks in Counting Rooms

Observe—“’Twas only a Balloon” —

—Emily Dickinson

Balloons

Since Christmas they have lived with us,

Guileless and clear,

Oval soul-animals,

Taking up half the space,

Moving and rubbing on the silk

Invisible air drifts,

Giving a shriek and pop

When attacked, then scooting to rest, barely trembling.

Yellow cathead, blue fish—

Such queer moons we live with

Instead of dead furniture!

Straw mats, white walls

And these traveling

Globes of thin air, red, green,

Delighting

The heart like wishes or free

Peacocks blessing

Old ground with a feather

Beaten in starry metals.

Your small

Brother is making

His balloon squeak like a cat.

Seeming to see

A funny pink world he might eat on the other side of it,

He bites,

Then sits

Back, fat jug

Contemplating a world clear as water.

A red

Shred in his little fist.

—Sylvia Plath

New World

As I saw it,

all my mother’s life, my father

held her down, like

lead strapped to her ankles.

She was

buoyant by nature;

she wanted to travel,

go to theater, go to museums.

What he wanted

was to lie on the couch

with the *Times*

over his face,

so that death, when it came,

wouldn’t seem a significant change.

In couples like this,

where the agreement

is to do things together,

it’s always the active one

who concedes, who gives.

You can’t go to museums

with someone who won’t

open his eyes.

I thought my father’s death

would free my mother.

In a sense, it has:

she takes trips, looks at

great art. But she’s floating.

Like some child’s balloon

that gets lost the minute

it isn’t held.

Or like an astronaut

who somehow loses the ship

and has to drift in space

knowing, however long it lasts,

this is what’s left of being alive: she’s free

in that sense.

Without relation to earth.

—Louise Glück

Suspended Vessels

*for Joanna Gooding and Simon Curtis*

Here is too narrow and brief:

equality and justice, to be real,

require the timeless. It argues

afterlife even to name them.

I've thought this more since that morning

in barren country vast as space-time

but affluent with cars

at the fence where my tightening budget

denied me basket-room

under the haunches of a hot-air balloon

and left thirteen people in it,

all ages, teens to grans,

laughing excitedly as the dragon nozzle

exhaled hoarse blazing lift, tautening it,

till they grabbed, dragged, swayed

up, up into their hiatus.

Others were already aloft

I remember, light bulbs against the grizzled

mountain ridge and bare sky,

vertical yachts, with globe spinnakers.

More were being rigged, or offering

their gape for gusts of torch.

I must have looked away—

suddenly a cry erupted everywhere:

two, far up, lay overlapping,

corded and cheeked as the foresails of a ship

but tangled, and one collapsing.

I suppress in my mind

the long rag unravelling, the mixed

high voice of its spinning fall,

the dust-blast crash, the privacies

and hideous equality without justice

of those thirteen, which running helpers,

halting, must have seen

and professionals lifted out.

Instead, I look at coloured cash and plastic

and toddlerhood’s vehement equities

that are never quite silenced.

Indeed, it prickles, and soon glares

if people do not voice them.

—Les Murray

The Blue Balloon

‘That night I’d padded to the children’s room

As mothers do, to drink the sound of sleep,

But stopped in the doorway and could not go in.

Something stood, watching them, the blue balloon

That rose there like a disembodied head

At human height—it had lost half its lift—

Or if it had a body, one string-thin

That hung limp as a noose and trailed the ground.

It was perhaps a draft that made it swivel

Slowly, as a head might turn, and look

Or rather, since it had no eyes, regard

Me where I stood stopped on the chilly threshold.

Daytime, of course, it was a blue balloon

Half out of helium, halfway between

The ceiling and the floor. I seized its throat

And scissored all the buoyance out of it.

Later, when the lights went out—for just

Two seconds maybe—and there was a noise

That thumped from deep inside the ice box—well

My heart clutched also—the sound like a fist

Pounding for release from under a lid.

When it stopped I laughed at how I’d been unnerved

By a freak of surging current. Later when

I lay down in my dark room on the bed

And waited for the headache to dissolve,

The bitter chalk of pills still in my mouth,

I wept and did not dare open my eyes,

As nothing held my hand, and held my hand.’

—A. E. Stallings