

—WHITE BALLOON

by Matt Samet

I walked the dog today down by the river, the thin strip below town where people launch their trash. The air is colder there but clean. You get the feeling that bad things have happened. You can't say how or why you feel this, you just know that you do. Maybe it's the shade, or the steepness of the bank, or the moss drying on the stones. Somehow, it just doesn't seem like a place where people should *be*, though they laid a path there anyway.

We stopped about halfway down, the hound sniffing at something, prying with one urgent paw at a steel-grey bolus of river rock. I pulled him back--he likes to eat human waste--and took a step, then saw something white, tattered. Underwear? A torn T-shirt? A dustrag? No, a balloon, white gone patchy where rain had carried silt across the shredded rubber. It lay strewn along the ground like a woman in twisted repose, strands of material splayed like arms and flat swaths where the legs would have been. I picked it up with a stick, twirling it. A string descended from the knot, a small note card attached to the end. I flicked the string into my palm and reeled in the card.

The balloon had come here somehow. I can't see the hand that released it, but perhaps it is a child's hand, a pink, grasping thing traced against cloud, feeling the globe's subtle skyward tug as a swelling of fresh helium primes it for flight. The child is conflicted: to let the balloon go is so sad, sending it off alone that way. But to keep it feels sadder yet--it will shrivel and deflate and soon crumple like a raisin. So, the hand releases, feeling the warm tickle of string against the palm and the rough-edged caress of the note card, then nothing. Perhaps a larger hand--that of an adult--closes over the child's hand as the balloon disappears, spinning upward into cobalt.

The balloon takes a lazy trajectory west, arcing over a newly planted soccer field then across a tangle of trailers beyond, casting a small, circular shadow that ripples across the shabby roofs, whispering along the metal spines of TV antennae and slipping into the bowls of upturned satellite dishes. Tripping higher into the troposphere, the white balloon stalls at a pocket of dead air. Directly beneath, sensing a sudden slip of shadow, a man pauses; he has been reading the newspaper, elbows tucked into his sides, eyes drooping with fatigue. His skin is cancer grey; he smells of mice. Across the room, her mouth mushy, as if filled with salt water, his wife is saying something. He can't, for the life of him, make out the words. His head has filled with the beating of moth wings.

The balloon travels on. Soon, it hovers above a picnic table set squarely in the

middle of a tidy backyard. A family gathers here, hands placed neatly atop a checkered vinyl tablecloth, heads bowed in silent prayer. A spread awaits them--a feast! A heaped bowl of coleslaw, thin slices of meat arranged in stacks and fans along the edge of a platter, fresh rolls piled in a basket and pats of butter set in a dish, a giant pitcher of iced tea with eight opaque, purple glasses enclosing it in a loose circle. The family finishes their prayer and sets to eating, but something--an amorphous cold--has passed across the backs of their necks, raising the fine hairs. Bile high in their throats and pressure building in their bellies, they cast their eyes downward, to their plates. A little boy at the end of the table pushes his food listlessly with a plastic fork. His mouth waters, but not with hunger. He feels nauseous, and as he looks across the table at his parents, their faces suddenly slack--tragic and ancient and lost--he feels a bruising to the brain. Nobody makes eye contact; flies settle on the food. The family holds silent, though seconds later the illness in the air has evaporated and nobody can quite say what has happened.

The balloon travels on, now forced earthward by a blast of supercooled air surging ahead of a billowing thunderhead. It comes closer to the ground, skating hundreds of feet above a tapestry of brown and green farmland. Rotting sheds and tumbledown fences punctuate the landscape. Packs of dogs roam free. They zig and zag across rural byways that reach straight-sided and in yellow-limned vees toward the horizon. They charge along irrigation ditches, sniffing at trash and rooting for scraps. They find a deer carcass thrown against a fence and tear at the red, vulgar meat. A smaller dog has been trailing them. He approaches the feed, but a black beast the size of a panther, with a head like an anvil, runs him off. The little dog cowers under a bent stalk of corn then feels something--a subtle shift in the air, a shadowy mass pressing into the soft flesh behind his ears. He shudders and goes back into the sun, his mouth rotten with foam.

The balloon travels on, its shadow skipping across neat rows of early-summer crops, and then passes a curl of two-lane highway--freshly painted tarmac (yellow on black) arcing across an old glacier-carved valley. Cars tear past, their roofs shiny against the sun, the windshields freshly washed for a country drive. Blasting along on tires gone soft with the heat, a semi stalls suddenly, the driver sensing the gas pedal go loose. He pumps and presses, feels clouds and sand in his eyes, rubs them. Something itches, something hidden behind the sockets. The engine catches just as the balloon swoops high on an updraft, its shadow rolling off the top of the truck's cab like a paint-thick tsunami. The driver blinks and feels a fresh tear course down his left cheek. It's hot, like blood, and stings the skin. He wipes it away and opens the window. The cab of his vehicle smells sweet, like a carcass.

How much farther can a balloon go like this? Can it track down the valley, following a rill that collects the moisture from a spring, becoming a stream, then some miles after--passing the silent mouths of humid canyons and leaf-strewn ravines--a river? Or does it slide diagonally over the countryside, driven by a storm across tangles of foothills and stubbly pine barrens? Maybe it falls limply to earth, clipped by a bird's wing or punctured by an angry blast of hail. Or perhaps, flattened by a downdraft, the helium seeping through its rubber pores, the balloon makes an easy target for some towheaded brat out shooting squirrels on an endless afternoon. Or maybe it just floats along, gradually deflating until finally fetching up against a tree branch, where