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Lighter Than Air

Nikki Magennis

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on earth as it is

prayer as story, story as prayer

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photo by matthew simmons

Lighter Than Air

Nikki Magennis

On April the 20th, 2008, Padre Adelir Antonio de Carli took off from the town of Paranagua in a chair attached to a thousand helium balloons. The lower half of his body was found in the Atlantic two months later.

I am not a fool. Despite what you think. I have been foolish, yes, but it's not the same thing. You'll laugh at me, I know, but that's only because people are afraid to believe in something.

I listen to the world around me. This is what I can hear:

I think the foil under my clothes is making many very small noises – at first I thought it was applause, then the sound of an old man, laughing hard enough to choke. It comes and goes.

Every so often a balloon bursts. It's like the sound of a gunshot far away, a lone soldier firing at random into a crowd.

The biggest noise, the most constant, is the wind. It batters my face. For a long time it made me angry. It kept pushing me further from where I was supposed to be. Eventually I felt as though someone held me with very cold hands.

As I look down at my feet, faraway and hanging in mid-air, I would like to tell you that I am not afraid.

I think of the men who drive the trucks, their journeys, thousands of miles long, where rain has disintegrated the red mud roads and there is no radio signal. Our Lady of the Way is the only one who might hear their prayers, the saints and the angels the only ones who might help a man who finds himself out there, lost and alone. I wish them to find somewhere quiet and cool, a place where the road does not stop or come to an end, but changes, becomes a kind of home, perhaps.

I would have liked to travel with my own altar in the back of a solid, six-wheeled truck. To the mountains, gas stations, the midnight stops. I would have spoken to the vagrants who live between places, and who are forced to feed on the kindness of strangers. I picture myself driving through the night with the Virgin on the dashboard, a rosary hanging from the sun shade, the cross swinging back and forth, the road unravelling in front of me. I could drive forever.

God, bless us travellers who have forgotten the way home.

I have questions. Forgive me. I want to know how long. Like a child going to visit family he no longer remembers. I watch the surface of the sea, blue for so long, broken into monochrome by the chop of the waves. In these endless flickering variations, I believe I can see the true texture of life. I try not to let my pride weigh me down.

I have been angry with you, Father. I can pass my hand through you, it seems. There are no strings. Science has failed me. I can rely only on the unknown.

How much do I have? Years passed. I don't recognise myself. My mother is a stranger. Her eyes grew paler as she got older, the way wet stones on the edge of a riverbed grow dry in the sun. She wore black for twenty years although you weren't dead. I dug up my old family, the graves were empty.

I am still cold. The stars are around me. Above me the sea is vast and silent.

I understand, father. I asked you as a child. I knew then, from your silent voice, what you required. I went to the church, I asked for little, I worked hard for you. I counted and counted beads until the numbers were meaningless. It was not enough, I know that.

Joseph of Cupertino be with me. I imagine the monks' faces as you levitated in front of them. You were hated. They sent you away. Yet the human heart rises, Father, doesn't it?

As I sit here the scent of my own dirt reaches me. I cannot run from it. I must sit with the dirt in my lap, drenching my foil suit, turning cold on my skin. It smells almost sweet. I remember the coffee I drank yesterday morning. Was it yesterday? Years ago, when I was walking the earth, with the blood running down my palms, with tears washing my face. I am singing, Father.

Can you hear me? Are you in the radio?

When I stood and gave service, I used to shake. Not with belief, but with fear. I am not a brave man. I am not strong.

I confess to Pride. I wanted the TV news, the Guinness Book of Records. To be famous, for my own proof.

I wish to make you a proposition, Father.

I will leave one half of me behind. The legs that walked the earth, the lower half of my body, the part with the dirt, I will leave it behind. Life can take my guts. The fish can eat them. I cannot be a bandit forever.

The other half, I leave for you. My arms, so that I can embrace you. My face, so that I can lay my cheek against yours. I want to touch you, God. I want to taste you and inhale you.

What are you?

Are you gathering for me? Will you answer me?

I am high enough for the angels to take me.

Would I dare to pray, to ask for this? I would have to believe that I deserved it. That your hand would sweep down, perhaps in the form of a helicopter or an Easterly wind, perhaps as a glowing cloud, and scoop me from danger.

What of the others? The desperate kids who sleep under bridges? Should I be saved if they are not? The prostitutes, those slow-eyed women, the weariness that weighed across their shoulders. They would circle at the truck stops, like scavenger birds with their eyes painted on, rocking back and forth on their high heels. Sometimes I would see the drivers torn between the two. They would stand in front of the chapel, it's true, they would cross themselves and stare at the Virgin, but all the same they couldn't help their eyes from sliding into the roadside, where the women waited.

And in the dusty purple evenings, sometimes even I would find myself drifting with a heart that was not entirely pure, Father.

We are such creatures of desire. We are so hungry. It exhausts me. The rage of the policeman, the need of the beggar, the pain of the mother with a sick child. To be constantly asking for something.

So I will not ask for anything from you, father. I shall let the winds take me. The sea is close now; it skins under me like a rushing screen. In the chopped surface I can see shattered pictures. It is my eyes, I'm sure. I can see the kitchen in which I grew up. I can smell the sage from the window. The face of our Lady.

The water swirls. I can see his brown dry skinned hands, the glint of a gold ring. The turquoise of the hospital wall, the white sheets.

It is running past me more, now Father, I can't tell if I am above or below the water. I am cold and I am burning. It is so deep it is blinding me, so slow I can't keep up. Take what you will of me. I offer you my travelling feet, my guts, and my stomach. I can't feel my hands anymore, but you can have them too. I can taste salt, Father. It tastes so good. I am thirsty. It is what I need, and there is no end of it.

Nikki Magennis is an author and artist. She lives in Scotland with her partner and young son, and writes dirty books and poetry to ensure uncomfortable pauses in dinner party conversation. She was raised agnostically - which makes the process sound grander than it was - and is now approaching Buddhism haphazardly, apologetically and hopefully. Her website is [HERE](#).

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