

Floating Children

At the zoo, among the winding, asphalt walkways, a little girl, separated from her parents, discovered a balloon vender, who asked her favorite color. "Red," she said. The vendor plucked the color from a limp bouquet, and threaded it onto a tank, where it became a translucent globe. The girl's eyes widened. She reached forward her hand, but the vendor said, "Tssk tssk," gently swatting her. "Do you promise to love this balloon?" he asked. The girl shook her head vigorously. Her two braided ponytails bounced above her shoulders. The vendor handed her the balloon, knotted and stringed, and taking it, the little girl floated heavenward, emitting a delighted peep of surprise, as if losing air. She ascended very rapidly, hanging from the balloon's string. The world beneath her became small and the girl gazed downward, squinting to make out the landscape below. She focused on the vendor, but he quickly disappeared. She looked down at the elephants and bears in their outdoor habitats, but they shrunk into nothing. Soon she was unable to distinguish the zoo itself as anything more than a speck on a widening earth, which was spherical and contained a strange feature like a tail or an electrical cord. The girl tightened her grip on the string of her balloon and sailed higher. There were balloons all around her: yellow balloons, green ones, blue ones, another red one in the distance. And from each balloon another child was hanging by a string, floating away, always away. It seemed to the girl she would never reach any of them, but rather drift into an expanse waiting only for her. She looked down at the earth and it was also a balloon, a blue dot. Underneath it a frantic child held onto its string, kicking his legs as the tiny planet carried him off.