

**Courtney Flerlage**

**Exodus**

Tonight the neighbors release sky lanterns over the ocean.  
Pulsing through red tethlon, the lights billow up & out  
as children dodge the flames to hoist the lights into the land  
breeze,  
all reckless steps & kicked-up sand. It's easy to imagine the  
catastrophe:

wind catches lantern and pulls from over dune  
to stilted houses and dry, salty decks.  
But the land breeze, air of the sea sun-warmed to shore,  
cools & sinks, & we can depend on the emptiness over the ocean  
to pull back its dead breeze. This is how space can trick you,  
imitate a living thing,

as when, three years before, I watched an astronomer inflate a  
red balloon  
in a vacuum. *What's filling it?* I asked.  
*Nothing.* It's expanding to fill the space.

(The couple on the deck next door tip their chairs back & sip  
umbrella drinks  
that tinkle every time they tip too far. I saw a star die once, the  
woman says.  
*It just snuffed out, like a dead firefly.* Tink. *Coulda' just been  
dust,* says the man.  
*They're so far away that space dust blocks them out.*)

Over the ocean, the red lights are shuddering spots in the dark,  
& tomorrow morning we'll find the casings washed ashore,  
mangled & sun-crisped like dried medusae.

I remember you used to name the stars to me  
when it was quiet & we were alone, sitting under all that old  
light—

*there's Sirius, Polaris, the Pleiades.* How knowledge & names  
cannot be unlearned—when pushed away, they only die  
& then return. If it is as Lucretius says—  
we must confess there is a void in things  
that, when created, will eventually fill with air—

then the universe is too efficient,  
& I'm not sure there are enough people on this Earth.  
Your recycled parts turn up everywhere—I've heard strangers  
laugh-choke the way you did; there's a baker in D.C. somewhere  
whose wrists have stolen your piano hands.

I've often dreamed myself into the tide of Moses—  
Red Sea rolling apart a path for my feet, crashing  
behind as I trek the sandy bottom.  
Unlike the crush of wave to shore, this cycle was never repeated,  
& so I'm convinced you can still see his footprints,  
as untouched as the pocked surface of the moon.