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# A Balloon Called *Young America*



JENNIFER CLARK

OPEN: JOURNAL OF ARTS & LETTERS (O:JA&L)

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**Image:** *A Balloon in Mid-Air* by Jules Tavernier (1844-1889). [Cropped.] Oil on canvas. 30 x 50 inches. 1875. **Public domain.**

## Almost a lullaby on this cold night

She has learned to make use of everything.  
The sap trough serves as a cradle.  
She lays the baby in the hollowed-out log.

The cabin swept clean, day's chatter tucked away—  
only the wolf family howling about something—  
she allows herself a sigh. Outside the cabin,  
a panther prowls the night.

Tomorrow's arms will stretch long and warm  
and hug the drowsy trees. With sap stirring  
in rousing bellies, soon it will be time to tap.  
For now, she rocks the sweet to sleep.

# A Balloon called *Young America*: Bangor, Maine

*from John Martin's Scrap & Sketch Book, 1857*

The whole town turned out  
as did towns around the town  
to see Mr. Wise and his balloon  
ascend at noon. We sat on blankets,  
rooftops, and flour barrels watching  
the cloth bag slowly swell with possibility.

As Mr. Wise leaned over the willow basket  
emptying bags of sand onto Summer Street  
the sun began to rise. How grand to think  
we might join sparrows and master the sky.

Hanky in hand, Mr. Wise waved to the stunned  
crowd as his ship sailed through the air.  
Skimming a wave of forest, he dug  
into weighted bags, tossed overboard  
fistfuls of sand. Some days, we still hear  
sand raining upon the green heads of trees.

## Elia Wilkinson Peattie (1862-1935)

*"The forest is beleaguered, and I—am I not in the forest? It must be that I also am beleaguered."*

-Elia W. Peattie, *The Beleaguered Forest*

Her characters enter woods, awful and as holy as a cathedral, and feed on wild berries. They drink from feeble streams trickling cold among the ferns. Some talk to trees. Tree, one character asks, *Don't you hear your own singing?* The tree, as is custom in the area, does not answer. In Michigan, though, they speak. Her trees mutter as lumbermen draw near. They moan as axes split their bark. Sometimes, while falling, they shriek. Sometimes, they kill a man, his crushed body placed on a litter of lost limbs, carried past pews of stumps, a sacrifice to the harvested and hewn.

## When Saginaw swayed to Little Jake's time

Each spring, after they'd fed the Saginaw with logs that boomed into the river's belly, the shanty boys stuffed themselves into the train, drank cheap whiskey, and brawled all the way to Saginaw. When the train pulled into Potter Street Station, most every window—kissed hard by flannel and fist—gaped open in surprise.

Little Jake was ready, wooed them with a brass band even before they staggered off the train, their caulk boots click-clapping, poking the town's handsome plank sidewalks. As the band streamed through town, the shanty boys lumbered behind, keeping an eye out for suds and women.

Converging at Little Jake's clothing store, they peered up as Little Jake—who could barely see over a whiskey barrel—leaned out the second story window and flung a vest to the lumbermen below.

Fights brewed until winners, clutching silk scraps the size of trembling aspen leaves, unjammed themselves and poured into the store for their matching coat and pants. As each jack dug a dozen dollars from bound kerchiefs, Little Jake—delighted to find himself in the midst of a flannel forest—replaced their “free” vests.

Prone to all things big and grand, Little Jake started a bank, bought a bigger store, put up a clock tower with a statue of himself hoisted on top. Saginaw swayed to Little Jake's time. Gossip kept pace when his wife took to traveling with the town's druggist.

After Little Jake left and headed west, even after he tailored his own death to suit him, the clock and his coppered self—in long coat and high hat—lived on, keeping watch over Saginaw and the grave of his boy who'd lived four months and eighteen days.

In time, the white pines, along with shanty boys, disappeared. In 1940, when wind had had enough, copper Jake toppled to the ground. Not long after, the town took down the clock, long tired of making time.

**Note:**

"Little Jake" (he dubbed himself that and even trademarked the name) was born in Germany in 1838, made his way to Saginaw, then briefly to the Detroit area, then ended up in Colorado, where he was considered the most popular man in all of Colorado. A cigar was named after him as well as a few other things.

JENNIFER CLARK

## About the writer:

Jennifer Clark is the author of a children's book and three full-length poetry collections. Her latest book, *Kissing the World Goodbye* (Unsolicited Press), ventures into the world of memoir, braiding family tales with recipes. She lives in Kalamazoo, Michigan and you can find her at [jenniferclarkkzoo.com](http://jenniferclarkkzoo.com) and at [@jenniferclarkbooks](https://www.instagram.com/jenniferclarkbooks) on Instagram.

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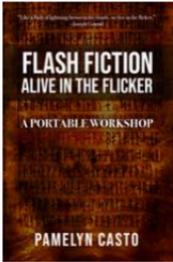
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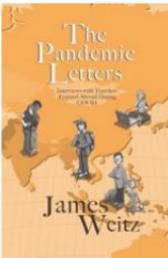
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