

MADAME AND SOPHIE ATTEMPT TO ASCEND IN THE INITIAL "A."

Carole Maso

Whether it was numeral or sacred symbol or just some glimmering, it was undeniably something, and the people pointed and cheered. Whether it was a mirage made of wishfulness or mad invention, a kind of gorgeous contraption, half flying, half falling, gold-leafed with scrolls — why it's really rather beautiful, whatever it is. And the people had cheered as the thing had lifted, and the people on the ground, bird watchers, Sunday strollers, lovers — all — had held their breaths and marveled at the delicacy and grace of the object which having fallen, began to levitate again — floating, beautifully, look oh look, all marveled at the sight, but it's veering now a little to one side, and we've lost it for a minute, oh there it is, back now, and then gone again and then back, coming in and out of sight, disappearing, coming into view, from behind those trees now — leaving in its wake an iridescence drifting now downward again. And then a sudden lift up again, a kind of sailing now, once it reached a certain altitude. Look someone says there are people aboard, and someone gets out a magnifier and sure enough there on the crossbar — yes — two women, one quite young, with what looks to be a rather big belly, she's pregnant you fool — and the other, God, has anyone before seen a woman quite so ancient?

Nevertheless, there they are gesticulating and trying to make a go of it. It has a pointed top, something like a spacecraft replete with solid rocket boosters, oh not really, and its flight anything but straightforward — look now it's nearly on its side again. But the other side this time. The airship, if that's what we'd like to call it, has something like wings, but not really. Someone recalled the butterfly in smoke. Like the butterfly, it seemed capable of a great number of, well — maneuvers. It's awfully beautiful, someone remarked noting its flourishes, the filigree, the 24 karat, the fanciful, yes, wings — perhaps it is meant to be decorative. Yes, but it's flying, in its way. Why it's aloft, is it not, in its way?

Such was the book, right up there somehow before her eyes, that she should like to write — but how? She watched the strange flying

machine — part bird, part kite, part wish — dip and swerve once more. Its beautiful paper wings. How to capture this particular vision, linked with feeling and idea and dream and beast simultaneously. This whirling sign, with little blurred border of roses and tangent and filigree, skirting, well, madness. Do you happen to know how to steer this thing?

It's beautiful — you have to admit that much. Luminous, bright, so bright it might incinerate. Conjured out of our hope — or hopelessness, she thought.

It's a love story, someone said, in an entirely new genre. It's a lark, a prayer. It's a confection, lighter than air! It's a barge on fire in blue air, or an effigy of some sort, someone conjectured. And the sound. It's a gondola encircling song. Very poetic.

And for a moment a scene did seem to cohere, with a story line of sorts: She might name the two in the boat with wings, Madame and Sophie why not? For company — in the vast sky.

In celebration, or consolation or just because, the sky suddenly seemed to fill with all manner of unlikely things: tightrope walkers, palm readers, kabbalists, magicians, balancing glyphs, sacred texts, and the people watched in awe as the floating and sinking emblems were blown about in the air. Ominous and not, flashing and floating — ashen words, fragments of bird bone and whim and wisp, configured and reconfigured before her eyes, these sinking and rising shapes.

Gaps, fissures, abrupt changes in register — the magic of the everyday.

The poet Robert Desnos says the marvelous is always beautiful, any marvelous is beautiful, there is no marvelous that is not beautiful.

It's a kind of flying chariot, she thought, and yes, definitively off the ground now.

A confection, lighter than air, a wish, a hope as someone has already mentioned, a pageant. The flurry of existence. And bells. A philosophy of wings: birds, migration, peace in our time!

Someone whispered something about perpetual motion and perpetual lamps and lamps that burned for hundreds of years and how such lamps might be made. Out of paper, you say.

And for a moment the woman thought, yes: it might be a love story after all. She could see it at last. In an entirely new genre. And in the sky: blue cerulean, the women waving and falling and rising, emphatic, emblazed, in the letter "A."

– from *The Illuminated Alphabet*