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Flying by Map

Shannon Castleton

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Flying by Map

Shannon Castleton

Wearing a watch he cut off a dead man,
my grandfather kept aerial maps
for the States in Paris—heavy ones
rolled stiff as a tongue. Flying home
after the war, he stuffed his bags
with maps folded into airplanes
that he would hang in the tool shed.

He tells me Lindbergh folded them.
He says Charles slipped
through a narrow back door, asking
for a route to Germany—his own map faded,
the Tower and the Seine both dull to him.
“Mister,” Charles said, as my grandfather
recalls, “the view’s not the same here.
I like to look down.”

They split a warm beer,
shared bread over maps. My grandfather
asked if the sky curves blue
against earth, or so he remembers.
He says Charles’ fingers worked
smooth as clouds, that he traced his maps course
as if he were tracing veins on a woman.
In the end they talked cars,
cities, and home—how all of it’s quiet
a long ways down.

My grandfather names Charles as his reason
for flying long years later,
in a plane piloted by a neighbor.
Crouched at the wide open door, he dropped
a sack of his wife’s ashes.
Sucked from their velvet pouch,
the black flecks trailed
along the still, green valley.