

THE WEATHER STATIONS



Stories by Ryan Call





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CAKETRAIN
[a journal and press]

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for Laura

HOW WE CAME TO LIVE IN THE SKY





FINALLY THE WEATHER WITHDREW its hostile presence, and we emerged from the damp caves and tunnels of our age of refuge to celebrate the miracle above our heads. Most of us had never experienced any sensation but the bump of our skulls as we squeezed sidewise in fumbling clots through the humid darkness of our mud-clad bunkers. We had evolved into a people of slouches and bent spines whom our elders admonished as they reflected upon a past when sunshine drew the young and good to their ladders to purge the gutters of debris. So it was that our liberation took the shape of an awkward crouch as we gathered upon the hillside and stared up into the sky, lost ourselves in its ceruleance, watching the soft wandering of clouds, all telltale and

docile, as they ambled along from one horizon to the next, their shadows following them across the ground.

A small child in the crowd began to sing, and our voices joined his, rejoiced in our survival, and gave thanks for the skyward pastures of our reclaimed home. We then thought to honor those who had not lived on, who had perished in the weather's clutches, the sickening darkness, and the crushing showers of rock and mineral. Our tears gave way to silent reflection as our mayor, a great badger of a man with enormous hands, moved through us to stand atop a boulder at the hillside's crown.

Citizens, he said to us, turning our attention to the ravaged, weather-wrecked ruins in the nearby valley, citizens, behold—our great city has fallen into rubble. The sidewalks and streets are strewn with the refuse of nature and man: rotten tree trunks and splintered telephone poles, snarled vines and twisted wires, broken blocks of eroded stone and massive knots of rebarred concrete, all the leavings of the weather's violent onslaught. The very foundation of our city is in ruin: our roofs have peeled asunder, our skyscrapers have toppled, our smokestacks gurgle rainwater and our sewers swell with dirt. Our manufacturing plants have gone to weed, our electric cables have snapped, our apartment buildings and condominiums now harbor lizards and snakes, and our universities and museums resemble anything but the symbols of human imagination that they once were. Our administrative

and government complexes, our infrastructure, our power grids, our canals, our trolley buses—all of these things are no longer in working order, are no longer stable, can no longer support any future for our families.

For too long, he shouted, shaking his hands about his ears, for too long we have lived like frightened vermin in muddy burrows. For too long our children have been robbed of the opportunity to run across a freshly mown lawn or lie in the grass and make little crisscrossed grooves with their fingernails to cure the itch of insect bites. For too long our children have not been children at all, have lived instead as pallid ghosts of the wonder of youth. Think, all of you, of the time we have lost to dirt and darkness. Think of the hours passed gathering piles of guano to harvest the bats, the talents of our culinary artists wasted on the narrow variety of bat-meat dishes—awful, all of them. Think of the memories you have surrendered to the gloom: the all-but-forgotten joys of eating a freshly split watermelon, shucking a banana of its peel, depressing the lever of the toaster to heat the bread on Sunday mornings.

You should not blame yourselves. You could not help but be morose down in the ground, could not help but lose your eyesight and furrow your brows. I, too, am overtaken with sadness as I wonder at the theft of all of this time, at what advances we could have made together had we not been cursed with this

attack. And so, I tell you, now we must regain our pride, we must strive to make up all the opportunities we have so terribly lost. Now is the moment for our city to rise up higher than ever—higher, indeed, than all of the land.

We will rebuild our city, yes—we will, we will build a new city in the image of our old city, a city that will withstand whatever nature sends against it, a city that will rise up into the sky, our mayor said, pointing, his arm trembling, a city raised up into the clouds, a cloud city, a city of the air currents, of the jet streams, of warm fronts and cold fronts, a city that will harness the power of the weather and put it to good use, only good, constructive use. We will never again suffer such tribulations as we have suffered, he said, his voice now rising to a shout, we will thrive and flourish, and our children will grow and prosper, and we will, one day, when we are old, look back upon our lives and see how we so wonderfully overcame strife in order to build the greatest city the world has ever known.

We citizens erupted into applause, cheered loudly our mayor's passionate speech. The children rolled joyfully down the hillside and clambered back up, the men clapped their hands and wiped tears from their whiskered cheeks, and the women raised the babies with outstretched arms until they laughed and bubbled up like fountains—the pink, squidgy promise of our city held aloft in the warmth of the welcome sun.

Hear hear, dear sir, we shouted to the mayor. We called for his leadership, for his guiding hand in this, our new venture, our resurrection, the liberation of our city from the fetters of the earth, and he obliged.

WE HAD SUFFERED so long below ground, had been led at last to safety by a single man, and now this man had called upon us—it was no less than our duty to answer him. The unforgiving caves had taught us to expect little more from our lives than the stubbed toe, the knocked head, or the heartbreak of a close friend's endless tumble down an unseen pit in the rocky floor. In the caves we knew hardness, sharp angles and mud, the limits against which we could never press too hard for fear of further pain.

Especially hard were the final weeks before our migration to the surface. Since our first evacuation to the caves, our scientists had kept track of the weather's presence with antennas and radar dishes, had seen indications of slow decay, of a sloughing off and scattering away. Our mayor had prepared us carefully for the move, announcing daily a new strategy for our adaptation to life above ground—urging us, for example, to avoid staring directly at the sun—and yet even after the mayor's initial announcement and the scientists' weekend-long presentation of their findings and the security guards' afternoon seminar regarding safe surface

conduct, even then did we keep ourselves in check, still in doubt of the potential for improvement in our lives.

The moment our hope collectively swelled occurred after a crisis in the nursery that nearly sent our colony into an irrecoverable despair: one of the children, an orphan girl whom we called Divot, went missing. Her absence was first noticed by the head nurse, who found the girl's empty crib during the afternoon rounds. According to procedure, she ordered the other nurses to sweep the cave, which proved somewhat time-consuming, for despite our best efforts to establish the nursery in the least dangerous of spaces, a series of stalagmites and sheep-sized boulders loosely populated one corner of the playroom. The older children loved to frolic about this wreckage, contributing to a generational spelunking prowess of which their mothers had grown proud, but on occasions such as this, the detritus raised havoc for the nursery staff, and precious time was lost in the early efforts to rescue Divot. The harried nurses held torches to illuminate the forms of children clinging to boulders and stalactites, but the light did not reveal Divot. They called Divot's name into the furthest crags and crannies, but heard only the echo of their high-pitched, desperate queries. They roughly interrogated the older children as to Divot's whereabouts but still could not find her.

It was not until one of the guards twisted about the periscope in the security room and happened to lens the pink-bound

figure of Divot gently lolling in a meadow several hundred feet above our heads that our freedom suddenly became clear to us—to everyone’s relief, Divot had not been swept away by a blood-thirsty cloud or burnt by a bolt of lightning. We gathered around the broadcast monitors, on which the guard projected Divot’s carefree image, and watched as she happily chased down a butterfly, caught it gently in her palm.

Our mayor emerged from his private cavern and joined us to watch little Divot, and those of us lucky enough to stand closest to him saw the torchlit tears sparkling on his cheeks, the excited flutter of his chest. Cause for joy came so rarely in our underground city that the sight held us in awe for several minutes before we finally broke into action: a rescue crew was organized to retrieve the baby, and another team of workers reported back that they had traced Divot’s crawlmarks to an exhaust vent, which she had apparently climbed through to the world above. We chuckled at her cleverness, hugged each other tightly in the main cavern, shook hands with the mayor, and returned home to our families to relay the tale, and that night, citizens all throughout our system of caves fell asleep to thoughts of Divot’s escape and what her journey might mean for our future.

BEFORE WE COULD BEGIN reconstruction of the city, we had to assess the damage it had sustained, separate the salvage from the

irreparable refuse. We split into groups according to our abilities: some of us remained in the caves to operate the kitchens and the washrooms, while others received cleanup duty, patrolled the streets with rakes, shovels, and other implements that we had collected from hardware stores across the city. We barrowed the debris into enormous mounds for the torchmen to burn away. The repairmen marched to the lumberyards, scrap metal shops, junk piles and rusted factories in search of machines and tools that might easily be repaired. The architects examined the structures of the city for soundness of build, and those that were deemed unsafe to inhabit were thoroughly destroyed by the demolition teams, who had long waited for the day they might make use of their explosive talents.

As we worked in the city, our scientists and engineers returned to their laboratories to formulate a breakthrough concrete mix they had dreamed up during our time below ground, a concoction derived from years of studying the clouds through whatever specimens they could collect, often at great risk to themselves, while on expeditions to the perilous surface. The formula allowed for a special bonding to take place between the treated concrete mix and the condensed water molecules that composed these clouds, and this special bonding was so subtle as to faithfully replicate both the delicate structure of the exterior cloudscape and its relative buoyancy in the currents of the air. In this way,

our scientists and engineers hoped that certain of the heavier, more stable clouds might prove useful as the foundation of our new city.

SOON THE DAY ARRIVED upon which rested all of our hopes for a better life, the first day of our reconstruction. As dawn broke, we gathered at the city center, an overgrown park surrounding a cracked, phlegmatic water fountain, and watched anxiously as the mayor stood, muddy and pale, squinting at the sunlight, in the bucket of an aerial boom lift and directed the traffic of construction, the rebuilding, the rising and steeping of our new city.

Engineers, he shouted, ready the elevators, and the engineers poured small blocks of the treated concrete mix into the lesser clouds, the scud clouds and drone clouds, which they had secured temporarily with thickly fibrous cloudnets. The engineers anchored into these blocks a series of industrial strength eyebolts. Satisfied that the weights held fast, the chief engineer nodded gravely to the mayor, and the mayor grimaced, rolled up his sleeves, and raised his arms.

Now the first skyscraper, our mayor shouted, and the engineers again flew into action, converged upon a nearby tower and set about readying it for the lift. We watched as their tiny figures scurried across the faces of the building, draped across it a system of wires, cranked blocks and tackle down into its columns, and

manipulated the levers and pulleys so that it could be shifted easily, with the aid of the elevator scud clouds, into the largest gathering of cumulus clouds directly above us.

We massaged our necks and popped the cricks from our spines to watch the final team of engineers rappel quickly to the earth, having ratcheted secure the last few bolts. All was ready. The mayor waited until the lead man had shoved everyone clear, then lifted a massive radio control device so that all the crowd could see. We quickly calmed each other, ceased our anxious clapping, and held our breath as one. When not another sound could be heard, our mayor plunged his meaty thumb upon the biggest button, and a series of little pops resounded around the base of the skyscraper, freeing the scud clouds from the nets so that they rose slowly above us until the wires and ropes and cables tightened. We watched anxiously, listened as the cables sang beneath the load, and then the building shifted ever so slightly, leaned leftward, rightward, worked loose of its footprint and came off of the ground.

Once free, the skyscraper flew higher and higher, its shadow dissipating until it seemed merely a trinket in the air, some oddly flung mirror or box of glass beads. The mayor dropped his arm and, at this signal, the chief engineer raised another radio control device to direct the skyscraper. As he manipulated the toggles beneath his fingers, we heard the slight whirring of thousands of fan

blades spinning high overhead. The skyscraper moved across the sky toward the largest group of clouds, in which the engineer meant to place it upon a prepared concrete pad, then tipped down, slid into its bedding, tipped back the other way, and settled. The cloud dropped slightly, a puff of dust sparkled in the sunlight, and the building found purchase in its new foundation.

We began cheering, a band played songs of jubilation, and the mayor waved happily to all of us from his lofty perch, his groundbreaking ceremony having passed without mishap. And so the party began: vendors worked through the crowd to sell hot dogs and funnel cakes, a professional photographer took pictures of proud families posed below the hanging skyscraper, and children gathered bits of fallen cloud and made funny hats from the remains. It was then, as we watched our children celebrate, that we realized that our necks had become free of pain, that our spines had straightened of their own accord, and that we had yet again learned to stand upright in the sun.

WITH THE SUCCESS of that first day, our engineers confidently tackled the rest of the city, and in a period of several weeks, during which we citizens were constantly greeted by the sights and sounds of buildings floating on air, of clouds elevating the heavy structures before unloading them and dropping back to the ground for another payload, our city seemed to rise from its grave.

We went back to work, each day climbing aboard a cloudbus and traveling into the air to develop the new city. We built between the buildings a system of cable bridges that could withstand the high winds of the upper atmosphere. We secured more and more of the clouds that passed us by, shepherded them under the city, where they joined together to create larger foundational clouds, accumulating beneath us like enormous, weightless cushions. Our plumbers rerouted our sewage systems and water lines to empty beneath us where the filtering masses of the clouds cleansed our dirty liquids, recycled the pure molecules back into our homes, and precipitated the harsher substances upon the dusty, trash-strewn ground below. Imagine, for a moment, the kind of engineering required to accomplish such a feat: in addition to the standard closet flange, the average toilet required over four hundred and fifty-seven extra feet of copper tubing, sixty-two t-joints and elbows, sixteen bypass valves, and a final mesh trap to prevent birds from nesting at the pipe's end—a mere hint of the complexity of the larger task we had before us, the complete reorientation our lives to this new and atmospheric living after so many days in the pitted darkness of the caves.

AS TIME PASSED, a wonderful thing happened that we did not foresee: our city's sewage fertilized the ground beneath us, and a garden of immense proportions grew up from the rubble.

Vegetative tendrils climbed their way to the source of their nutrients, and we could eventually reach down and pluck the ripest fruits from the tallest plants. Our gardeners, grocers, and cooks pronounced the fruit and vegetables of the garden fit to eat, and the mayor, upon their recommendation, organized a feast to mark the city's newfound bounty, at which was served exotic food the likes of which we had not seen in years: trays of pickled beets, cucumber, onions, pumpkin and squash stewed in tomato juice, steamed cabbage and shaved carrots, lettuce-wrapped artichoke hearts drizzled in raspberry glaze. From the sky around us we caught a variety of fowl, and these our cooks prepared as well: blackbird and spinach quiche, sparrows grilled on the kebab with pineapple, several frumpy geese stuffed with cauliflower, medallions of eagle liver. From the clouds themselves we harvested earth- and sea-bound animals which had been trapped during odd condensation events and frozen in blocks of ice: shrimp, frogs and turtles, a fawn, several under-sized tuna fish.

We drank and ate this bounty in the comfort of the night sky, the weak light of the stars filtering through the clouds around us to cast a hazy glow upon the festivities. Our women presented a dance to commemorate the building of the city, and the children staged a play to remind us of the devastating time of the caves. We enjoyed much singing and drunken revelry, and

then, just as the day dawned blossoms of bright orange and pink in the easternmost sky, our mayor revealed to us a new plan for our city.

Citizens, he said, holding up his wine glass so that we would pay attention, I have been thinking: we have established ourselves as a powerful force in the sky, our city is stable, our lives are once again pleasant, and now we only want for contact with others like us, those who might help us develop further as a society. I have decided to make use of our flying city and of the scud clouds we have at our disposal to export our goods, the harvest from our gardens and skies, so that we might engage in commerce with others beyond the horizon and thus rebuild our community, take back this weather-torn earth.

Again we cheered our mayor's thoughtfulness, though there were some who questioned this new plan, who feared the consequences of contact with those from other lands. What if they were of a violent nature? What if they were diseased or mutated? What if they did not take kindly to our diplomatic proposals? What sorts of religions might they practice? What might befall us if they were to somehow travel to our city? How could we protect against such danger? Of course, we couldn't help but feel a little silly to ask these questions. After all, who were we to doubt the mayor, this gentle man who had led us safely from the

bowels of the earth into the crown of the sky? He had taken care of us for so long, so how could we fail to trust him?

When these doubts were whispered to those who supported the mayor's plan, they were met with hushes, hugs, pinches on the cheek, assurances that the mayor would handle any situation that should arise. Plans were made the next day to launch a new program that would allow us to send our goods into the world at large. We stockpiled the choicest fruits and vegetables, layered pallets of frozen meats, loaded up trunks of the concrete mix, and over the next few days, a hundred miniature clouds shoved off for parts unknown, to make contact with others, to share our wealth and good fortune and to see, just see, if there was a way that we might also raise from the earth our suffering brothers and sisters.

FOR MANY YEARS we lived this way. Each morning scores of clouds left our city, bearing our goods for barter, and returned in the evenings loaded with all sorts of imports: cloth and ropes for our city's sails, foils and sheet-like metals with which we built our sun mirrors, spools of wire and cable to repair our thoroughfares, umbrellas and condensation pools for our rainmakers, and lace-woven nets for our bird hunters. As our riches increased, we rewarded the mayor with a mansion built atop the highest point of the city, an anvil-topped cloud from which he could oversee

his thriving metropolis, his happy populace, and feel intensely satisfied with all he had done.

We communicated with people around the world, and these people traveled to our city, invited us to visit their own, held conferences, organized international committees, established laws and guidelines by which the entire world should function. Our city expanded greatly with the comings and goings of these travelers and tourists, diplomats and soldiers, refugees and speculators, and with them our cloud network grew in complexity, and soon the skies surrounding us were a steady overcast, all shadowy and grey, a cotton mesh through which the sun could not shine despite the careful calibration of our sun mirrors. Our city stretched nearly from one horizon to the next, a continuous cloudscape of buildings and hanging bridges, of people living, eating, sleeping, breathing, laughing, crying, screaming to one another, overtaking the sky, and months passed at a time without hint of the sun or its warming rays upon our faces. Instead we weathered the errant rainshowers of the clouds high above us, noticed a dangerous increase in the cloud-to-cloud lightning activity, and watched as the gray skies became foul and black, polluted by our presence.

Eventually there lived among us only a few remaining elders who had witnessed the construction of this great city, had basked in that first ray of sunlight glinting off the first rising skyscraper,

and we elders solemnly shook our heads as we dreamed of simpler, happier times, of the long-awaited emergence from the caves, and of rolling down and clambering up the wildflowered hillside on that first hopeful day.

So goes the story of how we came to live in the sky.

CONSIDER THE BUZZARD





AS CHILDREN, we learned to gauge the temper of the local weather by observing the various ornithological activities in the trees and air above our heads. A wedge of sky devoid of crows demanded caution of us as we traipsed around the neighborhood, a rosary of starlings perched along the power lines or the soft twitter of tumbling swifts in our chimney freed us from the confines of our home, sent us rushing to the abandoned factories to play among the tangles of razor-wire, and in the din of shrieking, crying birds southbound for caves outside the city, we knew to lock the shutters and huddle quietly in our rooms.

Of course, a number of species proved less than reliable to our skyward observations. Consider the buzzard: a narrow-minded,

solitary bird flying high above the earth, eyes scanning the ground for carrion. Many times, we saw one suddenly twist in the air as if to correct for a disruptive gust of wind, only to disappear into a newborn thunderstorm, its evasive maneuvers come too late.

I cannot help but picture the vanishing buzzard when I think of my own inevitable end.

FROM THE MOMENT of my birth, a fierce and gusty event I've been told, my mother worked to shield me from the curse upon the males in our family. She forbade the midwife from performing the circumcision, and she purposefully barred the local seer from observing her labor, as if by hiding my gender and its writ of destiny from the outside world, she might save me from the desperate trajectory that had come to claim my father, his father, and every man since the beginnings of our troubled blood.

My sisters welcomed me as one of their own, a partner in sorority, and I grew to appreciate the intricacies of lace and velvet, the cautious shrug of costume jewelry. While the other boys at school wielded invisible bayonets and other implements of war, I became fond of the flexibility of certain dolls, the satisfying bounce and click of a quick game of jacks, and the cheerful symmetry of pink umbrellas and matching galoshes, which my sisters and I wore on the most rain-battered days.

The weather lumbered through the fuzzy background of our youth, occasionally leaping forward, taking our city hostage, pummeling us with volleys of snow, sleet, and the rare handful of toads or other small animals entombed in dirty blocks of ice. We often heard of storm-related fatalities, but the authorities presented these as the unfortunate but inevitable consequence of our large homeless population and the city's overtaxed shelters.

Our mother urged us to remain vigilant out of doors, despite the government's attempts to deny the severity of the situation. She taught us about the deception of low-lying fog, the creeping tendencies of mist, why open-air pavilions lacked enough protection from the weightier forces of nature. We heard in her voice an urgency that I later recognized to be the tired hum of the witness-bearer, upon whose heart rested the countless unspeakable events of her early life on the fringe, that northern boundary of our nation where the weather first rose up against us. And so we listened closely, my sisters and I, attuned to the import of her teachings.

A roof overhead and walls all around, she said to us, makes my daughters safe and sound, and it became a childhood rhyme of sorts, a phrase we often sang to ourselves as we walked to and from school, unaware of how dangerous our world would soon become.

AS FOR THE GENESIS of my trajectory, my mother knew enough of the story to tell me about my father's grandfather, the earliest of my ancestors still remembered for his fascination with the weather.

According to my mother, the old man remained at his wife's side long enough to conceive a son, my grandfather, before he set sail for the bottom of the world, flinging weather balloons and robotic sensors into the atmosphere as he went. On the ever-shifting continent of ice, he studied the last remaining penguins, took core samples of glaciated ridgelines, and reported via radio to a government-appointed committee as to the nature of his findings, until one day he disappeared into an ice storm and never returned.

MY MOTHER WARNED me especially to exercise caution out of the house, to which I often responded with loud tantrums, thrashing, ill-conceived attempts to hold my breath and pass out. I hated that she patronized me so. After all, my sisters appeared as fragile as I, so her focused attention on me seemed unwarranted, insulting, though now I understand that her actions came as yet another way to prevent the arrival of my fate.

I remember in particular a day when one of my resentful outbursts led to the shattering of a window with a well-tossed ballerina figurine. The thunderclap of the toy crashing through the double-paned glass quickly drew my mother and sisters into the room and away from whatever play-craft they had begun

without me. When she saw the broken window and the bright, clear sky beyond, my mother stepped over me, unlatched the inner frame, and lifted it and the remaining shards of glass away from the rest of the apparatus. She installed a new pane, which my sisters had helpfully retrieved from the hall closet, and locked down the brass handles at its sides, forcing the rubber gasket around the edges of the window to seal with a quiet gasp of air.

As I lay there on my stomach, I felt vaguely disappointed by my mother's quick work. We had long since sealed shut all the windows in the house, and I welcomed the jets of fresh air that had curled briefly through my room and ruffled the fabric of my dress. My disappointment soon turned to fear, however, when I saw how dark the sky had suddenly become, how rapidly the fog had rolled down the street toward our house, and I cried until she drew the blinds over the new window and carried me away to watch television beneath the high ceilings of our family room.

It is from this incident that I inherited my mother's awe of structures, their shape and form, the sturdiness of their foundations, the strengths of their materials, and the safety of the sheltered spaces within.

MY GRANDFATHER'S LIFE was ended at a military outpost across the ocean where the abrasive sandstorms of a distant country worked away at unsheltered men, first at their clothing, then

at their skin, and later still at their organs, before finally casting them to memory in bone-white remnants.

Dental records confirmed my grandfather's death, and his teeth eventually found their way into a jewelry box on my father's dresser, where they rested mysteriously until our house collapsed. On the wall above the yellowed teeth, a pocked and rusted medal hung in a wooden shadow box, commemorating an act of heroism long since forgotten.

When my grandfather told his wife that the government had drafted him into the war, really a military intervention back then, she congratulated him for the chance to escape the stricken weather of their homeland. Perhaps then, she had reasoned, he would break away from the legacy of the father, the meteorologist turned iceman, and lead the family into a new preoccupation, one less inclined to the rotten skies.

She had good reason to hope for a change, though she never told her husband why. He died in the blur of the monstrous sandstorms before she could announce her surprise: she had given birth to a son, my father.

THE WEATHER SOON ESCALATED in force, increased its presence in the vicinity of our house, as it typically did with the coming and going of the seasons: rain fell harder, winds blew stronger, and fog grew thicker, though we silently gave thanks

for the lack of lightning strikes. A scarcity of living targets retarded all cloud-to-ground activity; the citizens of our city had learned to remain indoors.

As time passed, we realized that the ferocity of this season seemed greater than that of last season and the season before: the weather had snuck quietly but consumptively upon us. Our playful forays throughout the neighborhood ended. Our walks to and from classes became a series of tedious drives, and then they ceased altogether when the school system disintegrated. We monitored the weather reports on the radio for momentary clearings in the sky so that we might visit the grocery store to replenish our food reserves. We could take as much as we wanted: the grocer had disappeared, along with most of the neighborhood, and we found ourselves in a state of isolation.

Freed from the concerns of community, we took to close observation of the animals, and soon noticed a profound anxiety on the part of the birds in the city. They still fled to the caves in the south when they could, but more often than not, cloudbanks swiftly cut off their escape route, trapping the birds on the ground, in tree limbs, and against the sides of buildings, where they suffered, flattened one on top of another beneath the impressive force of thunderstorms, windstorms, tornadoes and hail. Soon they could no longer safely lift themselves into the air and fly away, and with this my sisters and I began to lose hope.

The storms, though fierce, had not yet taken to raging continuously, and on the occasion of a brief respite, we drew the curtains, scanned the streets for the hopeful sight of emboldened birds on wing to fairer skies. As the rains lulled, the blurry silhouettes soon came into sharp focus: birds clinging to the lawn, flapping in the street, too numerous to count.

Why don't they fly away? I asked my mother.

She lifted me from the window, pressed a button to close the external shutters, and hurried me into the inner rooms of the house to join my sisters.

They haven't any strength, she said to me. The caves are far away, and they have nowhere to go.

We all stared at the television, which had long since stopped displaying any sort of regular program, news, entertainment or otherwise. Sometimes we could get cryptic messages from the emergency broadcast system, but at this moment the screen showed a kind of visual noise, an electronic snowstorm, the roar of which filled the room, eventually lulling us into dreamless sleep.

I NEVER HAD a chance to know my father. I have only second-hand fragments with which to imagine his life and what it meant, and in his absence, these shards of fact take on the shape of a myth to me, the tale of a hero who lived just long enough to create a wonderful family of daughters.

He wanted only to have a son, my mother once told me.

A shame he didn't, I said.

And I have all of you now, she said, gathering us around her.

My mother usually refused to talk about my father. She considered him a reckless man for tempting fate, and I believe she resented him for the way he had angled further away from her after each new baby girl came into the world. The intrusion of certain visions, odors, and sounds would sometimes break her silence: a kite swooping above the tree line, the bitter smell of a struck match, the warning beep of a garbage truck in reverse. Her migraines came on horribly after such remembrances. I often heard her describe him with words I could not understand, words like *airworthy*, *tempestuous*, *cold-fronted*. Sometimes the tone in her voice provoked the pleasure in me of having discovering some new snippet of him, and other times I came to worry over his soul, to hate his body for making me into the confused person I had become.

When the doctors sexed me in the womb and told my father that he had created a boy, he rejoiced. He was not one to believe in fate. My mother, however, wept for fear of the curse and what suffering it would cause the entire family, and when my father witnessed the passionate nature of her fear, he began to doubt his own calm skepticism: what if his disbelief might cause the malediction to come crashing down upon his son tenfold?

He visited the local seer one night as my mother slept, and the old man told him that he must weather the anger of the ancestors if he wished for his son to survive.

What is it, then, that angers them so? my father asked.

They fear they've been forgotten, the old man said.

My father returned home shaken, kissed my sleeping mother and her belly, and left us to go on his quest. I don't know what he hoped to do, but I imagined some fantastic journey of remembrance and sacrifice before the altars of the sky.

At my mother's behest, a private investigator was commissioned to track my father's movements—this proved successful until my father reached the coast where, the report concludes, he hired a hot air balloon for himself and drifted higher and higher out over the ocean.

Several days later, my father's last words came in the form of a postcard, addressed to my mother, blank but for a single sentence:

Take care of the boy.

I RESOLVED TO BRING aid to the grounded birds during the next break in the storm, and when the calm arrived, I enlisted the help of my sisters. A migraine had bedridden our mother, so she failed to detect our leaving the house, though we made sure to stay close as precaution against a sudden squall line.

We worked our way outward from the house in concentric circles which slowly grew to encompass the yard, the street, the playground beyond. Each time we had collected as many birds as we could carry, we quickly ran into the family room and released them. We covered the entire carpet in a swath of old newspapers, and on this the birds settled, some tucking their beaks back under their wings, others listlessly gazing around the room. In this way we managed to save many of the birds in our neighborhood, though the scattered dead and dying ones in our wake told the tale of much damage already done. The storms soon blew back into the area, and we secured the house and sat together on the floor with the feathered survivors.

OUR MOTHER DID NOT CARE for the birds at first; she kicked through them on her way to the couch, scolded us for leaving the house without her permission that first day of rescue. She complained about the constant rustle of feathers shifting in fitful sleep, the primitive stench of the dollops of shit that soon spread across the torn newspaper, the cushions of our furniture, the backs of our necks.

But when we showed her how a robin had made a haphazard nest in the magazine basket, using torn strips of newspaper, locks of knotted hair, a few sheets of tissue, she softened. The sight of the speckled eggs at rest in their makeshift nursery, of new life in

this battered house, restored in her a long-lost sense of hope, and soon she began to accompany us on our rescues.

As the storms grew stronger, the windows of calm weather became shorter. Though we still managed to collect handfuls of birds and bring them into the house for safe-keeping, no amount of work could prevent the empty spaces of lawn from filling again and again with different flocks of exhausted birds. They now seemed to migrate purposefully to our house, as if they knew they stood a chance at survival if only they could endure the beating storm until our hands plucked them from the ground.

WHEN WE COULD NO LONGER EXIT the house without fearing for our safety, we remained indoors and took care of the birds, now grown into the oddest flock we had ever seen, all manner of species covering the floors of our house like an immense feathered carpet. Flightless from trauma or some corruption of instinct, they crept around the house, heads bobbing stupidly above useless wings, hopping and stopping, turning a wide eye longingly up at our high ceilings. They called to each other with weakened voices and drank from a bowl of water we had placed in the middle of the family room.

Then our mother moved the water bowl to the top of a high bookcase.

If they want to drink, they'll have to fly, she said.

And so my sisters and I, fearful that the birds might die of thirst, set about training them, teaching them, restoring in them their finest skill. My sisters and I worked with the smallest specimens. We held sparrows, bluebirds, wrens above our heads and dropped them onto the soft surface of our couch. They often fluttered their wings lamely and then crash-landed into the shit-stained cushions. Occasionally some gained traction with their wings and flopped a distance to the hardwood floor, where they skidded along the newspaper. A few of these died on impact, and we gave them to the storms, weeping for the poor creatures that had become like family to us.

Others began to learn, and soon the smaller birds ably flitted here and there about the room, taunting the larger ones, the crows, the hawks, an old owl we had saved from the bowels of a rotted tree, all of which angrily shrieked and clawed at the walls.

Our mother worked with the larger birds for fear of our suffering beneath the sharpness of their talons. After the especially tiring training sessions, she served us dinner from our grand stock of canned goods, bloody scratches covering her arms and face.

Getting along? we asked her.

They'll learn, she said, or they'll die. She quickly downed her soup and then disappeared into the living room to take up her work again. Her work with the birds had given her a new duty, a

fresh purpose. I did not realize then how hopeless our situation truly seemed to her, and this must have silenced that doubt, however temporarily.

The intensity of the storms often shook our house, rattled the windows in their frames, sent the birds into fits of shrieking. Those that could fly whirled around our family room, flapping their wings with such fury that the feathers, the newspapers, the dried dung all rose into a heavy, cyclonic pungency. We could not calm them, could only retreat to our rooms and cover our faces with damp dish rags to avoid breathing in the impurities of the air until the war of the storm and the birds again subsided.

NO ONE EVER CONFIRMED my father's death, and I sometimes imagined perhaps that alone kept me safe from my familial curse, dreamed of my father still circling this world, shivering, starving, wasted and shriveled up there in the basket of his hot air balloon, the winds of the jet stream pushing him onward. I began to devote evenings to wandering brazenly through the labyrinth of caves south of the city, braving the storms in a desperate search for a way out into another world. As I staggered along rock floors shot through with stalagmites, I improvised a prayer in remembrance of my ancestors, released it to the air in mantric whispers in hopes that it would save my father, free my family from the torment of these years. Take me, but spare my sisters,

spare my mother, I prayed, my thoughts turning to their huddled bodies on the family room floor, surrounded by birds, waiting for me to return.

I prayed to my father, for what could I lose? If he were alive, perhaps the others would hear the words of a worried son and cease their fits of vengeance. If he had died, then I had already begun to ensure that his life was not spent in vain, to carry out the duty of a son: to celebrate his father in memory, to take his father's place.

THE WEATHER FINALLY TOOK its toll upon the edifice of our house. The winds ripped the shingles from the roof. The rain beat down and infiltrated the seams and cracks, leaked into our rooms. Round pellets of hail crashed through our windows, rolled along the floor, made us lose again and again our already shaky footing.

The birds by this time had gone into their standard routine of worry: they shrieked at each other, pecked at the ground and walls, and shat over everything to lessen the heavy loads upon their bodies. As their weight decreased, the birds rose into the air above our heads. They filled the room with the beating of their wings. They blocked out the light of our candles, snuffed them one by one. They created a massive, moving ceiling of feathers and wings and beaks, then descended in helical fleets, forming a sort of living chamber around our shivering huddle.

Soon we heard the crash of wood as portions of the house broke off and swirled away into the storm. Bricks loosened and shook in their cavities, windows imploded, the roof peeled away, clots of insulation rose up into the sky. The protective cage of birds remained strong throughout the collapse, even as the framing split and splintered, leaving us standing there upon the concrete foundation, wings beating about our heads. The force of their feathers seemed to enact a kind of pressure upon us, seemed to push us closer together, and we realized that they were sheltering us.

Just as our hands had once lifted them from danger, the birds, in their churning, swirling mass, now guided us away from the bare foundation, out into the street, and southward to the caves beyond the city. I parted the birds as if they were a curtain, and a flash of lightning revealed to me that we would travel safely. Peering out into the storm, I answered our father, gave him thanks, for I had not yet realized my descent.

THE ARCHITECT'S APPRENTICE





WITH THE TOES of their heavy boots, the retrieval team nudged aside the confused and anxious gulls so they could better access the piles of fallen cloud bits and slabs of broken sky. A black hole in the firmament gaped above, seemed to dilate there like an enormous pupil upon the blue expanse of atmosphere, and from this hole there came the slight, distant woosh of moving air, sending up miniature whirlwinds of dust that spun across the plains. A brown haze issued steadily from the hole, canceling the weak sunrise at the horizon and casting a gloomy pall over our city.

The team donned rubber gloves, mirrored goggles, oxygen regulators, and bright orange plastic suits to protect them as they set about dismantling the pile. The cloud bits disappeared at the

slightest touch, but the slabs of sky remained intact despite their fragile nature. The team worked carefully to preserve the integrity of the pieces as much as possible. They carried the smaller pieces by hammock-cradle, and the larger ones they set on soft fur-lined pallets for the forklift operators to move at their leisure. Contractors built a rudimentary scaffolding, and from it the sky technicians spot-drilled, glued, spackled, taped, and reinforced the edge of the hole to prevent further damage. Using air currents directed through a series of pneumatic tubes, crew members sought to contain the leaky haze in a corner of the sky so it could eventually be swabbed and removed from the scene by the skysweepers.

AS THE ARCHITECT'S APPRENTICE, I was obligated to sort the various slabs of sky by size, to polish them with a microfibrous cloth until their viewing surfaces were nearly transparent, and then to bevel their edges so that they might snugly fit back together. I had to account for every single piece by way of an intricate numbering system: with a grease pencil I wrote upon the back of each slab its allotted number, took an instant picture, and then secured in the architect's logbook the number, a brief description, and the image, so that the architect and I could repair the sky and stem the flow of haze.

Once I had categorized and sorted each slab, I prepared the work area for the architect's arrival. I roped off an area slightly

larger than the size of the hole and swept the surrounding earth clear of debris. I spread out an enormous cotton tarp upon which the architect could organize the pieces. I unpacked his work cart and laid upon it his tools, ensuring they were in good repair. I erected a telescoping viewing tower atop which he could climb and rise higher should he choose to examine his work from afar. In a corner of the workspace, I dug a shallow pit, situated in the dirt some kindling and larger pieces of wood, struck a flame, and hung a small kettle of water for his tea. The architect very much enjoyed drinking tea as he puzzled over his reconstruction of the sky.

WHEN THE ARCHITECT APPEARED on site, the activity beneath the hole momentarily ceased, and a murmur of appreciation swept through the workers. Even the foreman looked up from his clipboard to witness the architect's arrival. It was rare in those days to see an architect at his work, as we had not yet entered the age of massive sky failure, and mystery still shrouded all that the architect represented.

The architect stepped down from his gyrocopter, nodded politely to the team. I hurried to his side, steaming teacup at the ready. He took the cup and sipped its contents, swooshing the hot liquid thoughtfully about like a wash. The corner of his mouth dipped slightly as the result of a recent stroke, and so he whispered nearly everything he spoke.

Have you double-checked the measurements? he said.

I nodded, took from him the empty teacup.

Then let us begin.

We each of us stepped into a light cotton body suit, donned our requisite headgear, feathered gloves and moleskin boots, and thus I embarked upon the second path of my learning: the way of puzzling, of jigsolving, of fitting one part against another in the hopes that all might hold yet a while longer.

I HAD ONLY RECENTLY COMPLETED my primary level coursework and was assigned an architect for my apprenticeship, a man who was rumored to have piloted massive cargo dirigibles in his younger days. When the instructor read aloud my lottery number, the class shifted, some sighed in relief and others openly mocked my fate at the custodial will of this ancient curmudgeon. I bid goodbye to my mother and father on the day of my graduation, shouldered my duffel, and left the countryside, traveling by rail to the city to meet my new master. He greeted me at the depot, an imposing figure amid the rabble of the crowd, and immediately began to test my knowledge. As we walked to his quarters, a rundown ward south of downtown, the architect pointed to various parts of the sky, softly demanding that I name them, describe their features in technical terms, work through solutions

for their repair should they fail. When an answer pleased him, he nodded his head. When I spoke poorly, he pinched the dead corner of his mouth, correcting me in his quiet way.

In those days, there occurred very few situations that demanded our expertise. The sky held up well for the most part, and the weather was often pleasant. When faults did appear above us, most citizens chose to make their own repairs rather than rely upon the architect and his high fees. Others simply ignored the flaking bits of brittle sky and oozing haze, pretended not to see the glitter flurrying to the earth. Some went so far as to oppose sky architecture as a sort of political stance, investing their energies exclusively on what existed beneath their feet.

The doubt of the people lasted for several years, until the Great Southern Sky Fault came to destroy countless acres of crops, decimate herds of cattle, and swallow up entire neighborhoods of people. A haze began to spread across the country, and soon news of other faults worldwide appeared on the broadcasts, news of poisoned air, of missing people, of vanishing cities, all manner of things swallowed up by the falling slabs of sky. Most alarming was the fate of the missing, for no one understood then the nature of these disappearances, how they had happened.

The intensity of this new era hardened across my skin as I threw myself doubly into my work, slept very little, consumed

only one meal a day. I read voraciously as many of the incoming reports as I could, though no amount of book study or home practice could prepare me for this new task.

It was not until our city suffered its own fault that I learned to handle the sky.

WE WORKED INCESSANTLY but carefully, and the slab of sky slowly took shape, a massive puzzle forming upon the tarp. Spectators came and went, standing beyond the velvet ropes to watch us at our work. A contingent of city commissioners made regular walkthroughs to see their budgets at work. The foreman checked our progress every shift, clucking his tongue in approval and scrawling notes upon his clipboard. The workers stood idly about on their lunch breaks to watch as the architect shimmied a piece this way or that, applauding lightly when it finally found purchase. I kneeled proudly beside him, teacup in my hand, occasionally wiping from his brow sweat, dirt, and the chalk he used to mark out potential placements. When he grew tired, the architect napped on a small cot I had placed by the fire, while I stood watch behind a sign that requested silence from the onlookers.

Though we worked hard and skillfully, we did encounter setbacks, and occasionally our progress ceased. We tore our feathered gloves upon the slabs' sharp edges. A finished piece

slipped from our grasp, breaking into smaller fragments that I then had to repolish, rebevel and sort into subcategories, recording these new pieces in my notebook beneath the original entry. Most frustrating of all was the amount of change the slabs underwent, for we had hundreds of skies to keep track of, and from these skies appeared all manner of phenomena, weather and otherwise: blinding sunlight beamed across their surfaces, storms sometimes spilled their rain onto our work area, snow flurried about our hands, and the occasional bird came flapping up into our faces, striking us with its wings. I dealt with it all as professionally as I could, employing umbrellas, warm clothing, and protective nets, but I still grew despondent. The architect, however, took our troubles silently, easily. He retired to the cot by the firepit, draped a wet cloth over his face to calm himself, and soon snored peacefully, while above us the haze continued to spread from the hole, reminding me of the urgency of our task.

BY THE GLARE of the floodlights trained upon the hole, I shuffled through my bag in search of my parents' letter of five days earlier, to which I had not yet responded due to the extraordinary circumstances. We typically kept up a weekly correspondence during my apprenticeship, and I worried that they might wonder about me, though surely they had heard news of the fault above the city and understood the danger I faced. I often shared with

them the reports I read, and I made a habit of sending them tips for identifying in their own sector the signs of potential fissures: slight puffs or tiny jets of brown haze, a multitude of daystars, traces of fallen cloud and sky and the many other warning signs I had been trained to identify.

This letter was marked by my father's precise but tiny script, a habit from his days as a hurricane hunter noting coordinates with a grease pencil on the cockpit canopy of his airplane. He began with the usual reports of the weather in the area and the status of the sky. *We rural folks are still blessed with the deep blue of a strong atmosphere and the soft curve of the horizon, and we even delight in the occasional interruption of cumulus cloud.* He then gave me the latest news regarding the family wind farm: its current income and expenses, what turbines he had repaired, how my mother had invented a bird- and bat-friendly netting that could be strung around the perimeter of the farm. *Your mother insists that I install it soon as possible, but I have yet to receive a permit from the courthouse.* He closed the letter with assurances that all was well, on earth as above it, and wished me luck and success in my current station.

Rereading the letter awoke in me a longing for my parents, for my home, for the sky under which I had played as a young boy, a sky at odds with the diseased one now over my head. My mother had enclosed a series of photos of the sky above the

house, and as I thumbed their slick surfaces, scanning the vibrant shades of blue and lines of soft clouds slowly encircling the roof, an idea came to mind. Surely one sky was not all that different from another, so what prevented me, then, from giving to the people of my city the makings of such a handsome one as that of my childhood?

WHEN THE ARCHITECT AWOKE, I brewed for him another cup of tea and told him about the sorting of temporary placements I had accomplished throughout the night. We walked the perimeter of the work area, and I showed him my chalk lines and one small corner of the slab that I had eagerly assembled on my own. So sure was I of my calculations that I had gone ahead and locked each piece into place. I waited for the architect to congratulate me, but he only walked quietly at my side, the teacup shaking slightly between his thumb and forefinger. We rounded the final corner of the area and climbed aboard the platform. I cranked the handle to ratchet us high over the entire slab, and there we stood in the morning breeze, looking out over the plains. The morning work shift had arrived, and under the direction of the foreman, they were installing the skyhook, a mysterious machine that hung in the air of its own accord, with which we would hoist the finished slab into its proper place and plug the hole in the firmament.

The architect pinched the side of his mouth.

Do you see here, he said, how the contour does not at all match that of what you have pieced together? He held up a photograph of the city's sky and pointed down at the earth.

I gazed at the photograph and then at my handiwork. Of course I could see the differences, for I had not worked from the original. When he looked up to examine the hole, I glanced at the photograph my mother had sent me, then at my slab, then at the photograph again, and felt pleased with the result. I had worked long under the artificial light of the floods, and I seemed to have achieved a faithful approximation.

What is that? he said, grabbing the photograph from my hand. Where did you get this?

I thought I might improve upon it, I said, gesturing to the air above.

The architect shook his head. You have no idea what you have done, he said.

From the slab I had constructed appeared a handful of miniature storm clouds, which rose toward us, spitting into my face as if in mockery.

Take us down, he said.

The architect summoned the city's contingent to explain the error I had made, apologized for the delay, and said that we should be perhaps a few more hours at the longest. He bowed to the officials, then snapped his fingers at me. We sized up the

faulty slab, levered it from the ground, and took a moment to rest, he on the skyside and I on the reverse. We tried to pivot it over to the worktable so that we could dismantle it, but it was so bulky that it dug a furrow into the dirt. I felt it tilting from my grasp, the edges slipping from my fingers, and it slowly fell away from me, a giant toppling artifact. I feared the architect's anger as the slab met the ground, but my fear turned to horror when I discovered he had disappeared beneath it.

I HAD READ of such catastrophes, but never expected to face one without the architect cleverly leading me onward. My training manual offered only preventative cautions from these rare emergencies, with no detail for best practices should they actually occur. I stood alone, the dust settling around me, the city officials blinking at me, the foreman frozen with his pen raised to his mouth. I discovered at my feet the architect's teacup balanced precariously on the edge of a sliver of sky. It rocked slightly, then dropped, shrinking as it fell further away from me.

I realized then the danger we faced, the architect gone to some othersphere and I surrounded by countless slabs of broken sky, a pockmarked landscape of holes awaiting my first loss of balance. I beckoned to the foreman and explained the dilemma. Soon he had harnessed me onto a cable from the skyhook's winch, and then he locked down the site, declaring it off-limits to

all but the most important emergency personnel. He dismissed the workers, resituated the onlookers behind a guarded boundary, and ushered the officials into the mobile headquarters, where he explained to them my task.

I chalked a bright yellow outline around the suspect shards of sky: these were the skies into which I would have to go in order to look for the architect. I recategorized them, carefully marking them down in a separate part of the notebook and double-checking my entries. I began my search with the smallest of the broken slabs, into some of which I could only reach elbow or shoulder deep. From these I withdrew the world in miniature: handfuls of dying hummingbirds, broken balsa wood airplanes, a confused swarm of honey bees, a tiny oil bubble that rested momentarily upon my thumbnail. Perhaps it was best that I could not find the architect in one of these smaller skies, as I wondered what would have become of him had I pulled him free. Would I extract a little person of an architect? Would he be a child again? Would my saving him from the fall destroy him upon his reentering his own world? I shook these doubts from my head, logged in the notebook each miniature piece I deemed clear of his presence.

When the time came to search the first sky slab into which I could fit my entire body, I steeled myself for the moment,

instructed the foreman to allow the cable to play out until the very end, slowing it only the last hundred feet so as to minimize the force upon my body when it jerked to a stop. I waved to the officials, who drolly waved back at me from the window of the headquarters, and stepped into the sky.

THE FIRST GROUP of slabs each exhibited internal damages, aberrations in their being that slightly shocked me as I dangled there at the end of the cable. One sky blinked the colors of mud, of turd and wood pulp, of raccoon skin. Another sky sent congested clouds toward me that scraped at my body in their passage, leaving an oily residue clinging to my skin, beading upon my eyelids and lips. Lightning bolts punctuated the ruddy darkness in these skies, and around me churned thunderstorms, hail and snow, whirls of heated, angry air. I encountered skies full of twirling dandelion parachutes, clots of grass, ridiculous tufts of hair that clogged my breathing apparatus and rendered my goggles useless. In one sky, I found enormous gatherings of disrupted earth and granite which harbored all manner of arachnids and stinging insects, and I emerged dazed, weak from the poison that had penetrated my suit and the rocks that had bludgeoned my helmeted head. Flocks of mutated birds, some flapping viciously, screeching through the fluted openings of their bifurcated beaks,

battered my dangling body about like a toy. Flying fish in one sky greeted me, tenderly nipping at my ankles, sucking the blood from my toes.

Upon my return from each sky, the medical personnel nourished me with intravenous fluids, replenished my oxygen, conducted psychological evaluations. One asked me if I had considered giving up, leaving the architect to save myself, to which I shook my head: I had sworn to serve out my apprenticeship, and therefore had to save him. The officials anxiously explained that in my absences, the haze from the hole above had begun to overflow the containment fans, had quickened in its pouring forth and now threatened to seep into other parts of the sky. But I could not give up, could not stand to face the great task of repairing the hole without the guidance of the architect. The shattered remnants of my own creation, all the errors they revealed, had convinced me that I could not do it.

AS I WORKED my way through one batch of slabs after another, I began to encounter bits of people, and I realized that soon enough I would meet a living member of the disappeared. The bits I initially encountered were limbs, torsos, featureless heads, bloodless parts that had, presumably, been severed by the falling slabs, swallowed away to these broken skies. Each new piece of floating flesh made me curious as to what had happened to its owner.

Parts of buildings also began to appear, as well as automobiles, chunks of pavement, road signs, stoplights, the empty half of a swimming pool and its attendant plumbing. In a bassinet I discovered a freakish baby, but could not grab a hold as it circled away. A school bus hovered by, its young occupants wide-eyed and frightened, pressing themselves against the windows. A crumbling city block appeared, rising slowly up to me, and I was able to stand momentarily upon its cracked pavement between the tottering buildings. I felt the bulk of it shifting, heard it humming in the wind. A man in a ragged poncho greeted me, begging for help, a teacup outstretched, a handful of coins tinkling against its porcelain, but before I could examine him further, the block fell slowly away, the area of crumbling street and bits of earth passing again beneath my feet, the teacup now just a bright dot in the man's dirty hand.

TOPSIDE, the city officials demanded that I give up the search. The haze had descended onto the plain and now encroached upon the city's walls, soiling the stone and mortar. The construction camp hastily erected a barrier of containment booms and absorbent cloths, but these had begun to fail. Many of the workers fled, and those who remained walked lazily about, their protective gear fuzzy with gunk. It seemed that even the scrubbers had lost their effectiveness upon the accumulating fog.

The mayor approached me, demanding that the hole be plugged with whatever quality of sky I could create quickly.

I found a sign of him, I said.

It matters little now, as long as we can stop the haze, he said.

There's hope, I said.

You have until sundown, he said.

AS I DANGLED there in the blue void for what was to be my final trip, awaiting whatever grotesque and distorted cipher of reality was next to come my way, the guilt of my failed experiment weighed heavily upon me. With the architect gone, I feared that there might be no one at all who could restore the sky. I imagined the haze stretching across the world, enshrouding all in sickening darkness, envisioned it coming for my parents, blotting and suffocating their simple existence.

Just then, my eye caught the shadow of a large structure rising from a dark thundercloud and floating up to meet me. Some of the roof had torn away and the chimney had gone missing, but I was still able to quickly recognize that it was my own childhood home. A good plot of land managed to cling to the foundation of the structure, and an old dairy cow stood clumsily in the front yard, a rope secure around its collar so as to keep it from wandering too close to the edge.

I touched down upon the edge of the yard. The grass felt soft and fragile beneath my feet, and under my weight a portion of the lawn collapsed and fell away. The cow skittered and I tracked around it to give it a wide berth. I climbed the wooden steps to the porch and stood before the door. It gave way at my touch, and I walked carefully through the front hallway, managing my cable behind me so that it would not mar the surface of the walls with its scraping. The house seemed out of sorts, dusty, parts unhinged and broken, but the lights still burned on and from the utility closet I could hear the sound of something bumping around in the clothes dryer, the hiss of water running on the second floor. In the family room, I found the television on but muted and tuned to the local weather station. My family's favorite program for as long as I can remember, the local weather broadcast eschewed the spoken word in favor of soft electronic music and simple infography imposed against a tranquil blue backdrop. Outside, the wind blew against the house, rocking it gently within the sky.

Mom? I called. Dad?

I walked through the dining room and found a pot of bubbling tomato sauce standing on the stove. In the sink steamed a pot of spaghetti noodles, and next to it, a plastic colander. I found a pair of oven mitts and drained the noodles, watched the

vapor condense on the kitchen windows, obscuring the world outside.

In the dining room, I found the table set for three, all of our usual places.

I disconnected my harness, the cable whistling as it retracted through the front door, and sat in my chair. I anticipated my parents descending the stairs, the joy in their eyes as they emerged from the kitchen doorway. Here, I imagined, they would be younger, their faces unlined, my father muscular and no longer bald, my mother taller, thinner, her hair black and long to her waist, and I too would be younger, smaller, waiting for them to come to dinner.

RYAN CALL was born on Hill Air Force Base in 1983. He has since lived in Maryland, Tennessee, Virginia, and Texas. His stories have appeared in *Conjunctions*, *Mid-American Review*, *New York Tyrant*, *Annalemma*, *Sonora Review*, and elsewhere. He lives in Houston with his wife and dog.

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