Clouding

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The ability to recognize kinship is a god. That at least was the ancient wisdom, and it still holds true today. "I know you!" A bright idea. Love at first sight. A letter from a long-lost friend. An old photograph found in an antique shop that proves an exact likeness to your mother, your child, or yourself. Like being drawn unto like. Kinship. All of these are epiphanies, theophanies, each one tender as a bolt of lightning. Etymology suggests that the atheist is not the one who refuses belief in the divine, but the one who has been *abandoned* by the gods. The atheist is the archetypal lonely guy. I've known a few of them in my day, and I've observed that while the divine may sometimes forsake an individual, sooner or later a blessed—or terrifying—reunion takes place: the lonely guy falls in love. It may be with a person, but just as dramatically it might be with an idea, or what lies behind the idea. In any case, when the forlorn one is unexpectedly visited by a passion, life suddenly becomes head-in-the-clouds.

Traditionally, clouds are symbolic of things indeterminate. Composed of air and water, their essential nature can be attributed to neither element but arises in an obscuring of the two, a betwixt-and-between phenomenon, not unlike human beings, those nebulous creatures who themselves seem caught between realms, floating along between the shimmering horizons of birth and death, here and there, earth and heaven. Buddhist psychology refers to the aggregate of what we call personality as "the five clouds of entanglement."

But if we are clouds, we are also luminous. Xenophanes, writing at the dawn of Western philosophy, tells us that the stars are actually clouds "ignited by motion,"

kindled in their rising and extinguished in their setting, like coals. The sun too is a burning cloud, and as with the stars, each day it's a different cloud that is set ablaze, for no two suns are the same, though they share in the same flaring grandeur—and this goes on forever because the world is imperishable, without beginning, without end. Herein hovers a magnificent hope: entangled clouds that we are, sooner or later in our driftings we're bound to catch fire, become a star or maybe even a sun, and not just for fifteen minutes but for a whole day or night. Every soul is combustible.

In 1939 the International Commission for the Study of Clouds published a manual on how to observe these objects Shelley once called "nurslings of the sky." Before telling someone how to look for something, it is prudent to state clearly what is being looked for. Thus, the International Commission tells us, in language a little less elevated than Shelley's, that a cloud is an atmospheric event consisting of "minute particles of liquid water or ice, or of both, suspended in the free air and usually not touching the ground." It's the "not touching the ground" part that sparks my interest.

The Pythagoreans spoke of a mysterious "Counter-Earth," a sort of shadow world that occupies the orbit exactly opposite to the Earth, so it's always behind the sun, hidden from our view. I like to imagine this Counter-Earth as a place where each of us has a provocative counter-self who lives a colorful counter-life amid a vibrant counter-culture, an existence that is not really opposite to the one we enjoy or suffer here, but rather is entirely *other* to it, much as our dream lives are not opposite but *other* to our waking lives. Though our memory of it may be sketchy, we visit this Counter-Earth every night. Perhaps clouds are its allegory, opening a correspondence between the two worlds. In this sense, each cloud ought to be received like a love letter—or a ransom note—from beyond, endlessly unfolding across the sky. Another cloud book that recently came into my hands—B. J. Mason's *Clouds, Rain and Rainmaking*—cautions its reader: "At first glance a cloudy sky may appear chaotic, but the perceptive observer will discern some semblance of order, the existence of recognizable patterns." Things up there in the sky are not what they seem, say the scientists, and this resonates nicely with what various occult traditions have been fond of saying for millennia: "As above, so below." It is regrettable that the International Commission's manual offers no additional speculations in this regard.

Knowledgeable authorities in the past, however, were less hesitant to enter these darkling realms. The druids, for instance, are reported to have practiced a form of

cloud divination. When a king or queen wanted a glimpse of the future, the druid was dispatched to the summit of a nearby hill or mountain to consult the clouds, much as the augurs in ancient Rome gleaned insight by watching the flight of birds. Before that was Moses, who climbed to the top of a mountain to converse with God, God who would meet him only under the cover of a thick cloud: "And the glory of the Lord rested on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days." And coming down to us from fourteenth-century England is a book of mystical instruction titled *The Cloud of Unknowing.* I like to think of it as a manual on how to observe the weather of the mind. "When I say darkness," the anonymous author explains, "I mean thereby a lack of knowing. . . . And for this reason it is not called a cloud of the air, but a cloud of unknowing, that is between thee and thy God." He also offers this salty advice to those who would plunge into such obscurities: "Short prayer pierces heaven."

We human beings remain fascinated by clouds, perhaps even more so today than in earlier times, because in their shape-shifting inexactitude, their openness to the world, clouds seem so entirely *other* to our rock-solid world of property rights, scientific and historical "facts," fixed identities and the politics that go with them. "I'm a Republican!" "I'm a feminist!" "I'm an environmentalist!" "I'm an antiglobalization anarchist!" What's in a name? Wrong question. Better to ask, What's outside a name? What you'll find there is nothing but clouds, free and easy wandering. One of my favorite Zen koans contains the line, "I am not a human being!"—a gentle reminder of the clouds whereof each of us is composed.

Nevertheless, we persevere in our efforts to pierce heaven, now preferring telescopes to prayers. Contemporary cosmologists would lead us by the eye down their long tunnel and through their thick lens to the very heart of the universe, which is revealed not as the still point of old, but as a noisy "Big Bang." Contemplation replaced by a fireworks display. Yet we are estranged from our very selves. Who among us can penetrate even the little secret of our own shifting moods, those storms of passion that characterize our most ordinary affections? "From day to day," writes Emerson, "the capital facts of human life are hidden from our eyes. Suddenly the mist rolls up, and reveals them, and we think how much good time is gone, that might have been saved, had any hint of these things been shown."

Consider that holy logic chopper Thomas Aquinas, who devoted his life to composing his multivolume magnum opus, the *Summa Theologica,* regarded by many as the most important of all Christian theological works. It garnered for him

a well-deserved renown, but no entry into that heaven he so diligently stormed with his intellect; instead, attainment came near the end, unexpectedly and without effort. The story goes that just a few months before his death, Aquinas was celebrating a mass when suddenly he had a mystical experience. After that he gave up any further work on his *Summa;* he quit writing altogether. When somebody asked him why, he replied: "All that I have written seems to me like straw compared with what has now been revealed to me." It's often the case that what we so desperately long for is nearer to the heart than the heart is to itself.

When I was in graduate school studying literature, I came up with an idea that, had I pursued it, would have made me a rich man. Instead, I spent all my time on poetry, which is why now I write essays like this just to pay for the groceries. But anyway, it occurred to me that given American consumers' insatiable desire to lay claim upon the intangible—everything from acquiring a stock portfolio to owning a "piece of the Rock"—why not give them the ultimate pie-in-the-sky delusion: Why not offer them an opportunity to buy and sell *clouds*? Allow me to explain.

At the time, I was living in Maine. My plan was to wait for one of those bright August afternoons that occur on days after a powerful cold front has moved through, a day when the sky is filled with those fluffy cumulus clouds, the sort Daisy Faye wanted to push Jay Gatsby around in, clouds clearly detached from one another and sharply delineated, each insisting upon its own individuality (if only for a moment), the kind that John Muir lamented were "hopelessly unsketchable and untellable."

But not un-photograph-able.

That was my plan—to take pictures of individual clouds, and for each one print up an elegantly lettered deed of title on parchment, then put them up for sale. A typical deed would read something like this: "Witnesseth, that in consideration of Ten Dollars ($10.00), in hand paid, the receipt whereof is hereby acknowledged, the said grantor does hereby grant and convey, sell and confirm unto said grantee, his heirs and assigns, all that certain piece or parcel of cloud situated, at 1:18 P.M. on the Eleventh of August, Year of Our Lord 1983, in the sky above Pemetic Mountain in the County of Hancock, State of Maine." One caveat, one encumbrance let us say, on this transaction: while each deed would confer full title to a particular cloud and specify the exact time and location it was last seen, the bur-

den of again locating said cloud rests entirely upon the buyer. That's why every deed would be accompanied by a photograph of the cloud—at least then the buyer would have a clear image of what it is he's looking for and a place to start. Thus, he's already two steps ahead of most idealists.

Consider this cloud scheme my contribution toward keeping the nation's economy on track. We all want to own a piece of the American Dream, but given a country with an ever-increasing population and a "limited resource" of land, comparatively few will be able to own real estate, but everyone can have title to *un*-real estate—we can all be cloud owners! Poverty, says Plato, is not a function of small property but of immense desires. So give them clouds! People could even assign names to their cloud-property, much as the wealthy do for their estates: "Sunnybank," "Olana," "Onteora." The sky's the limit when it comes to the number of clouds that can be put on the market. They are not, at least in many parts of the globe, a limited resource, they can't be used up, and the world keeps making more. In this sense, clouds are a lot like kisses: you can keep giving them away but they never run out.

My plan was to open a little Un-Real Estate office down on Cottage Street in Bar Harbor. "Cloud Nine" would be its name. Instead of pictures of houses posted in my storefront window, there would be clouds. Had my life not taken a very different course, and had the success of this business been anywhere near commensurate with my dreams for it, franchises would have spread out quickly, and today you'd be looking at a Cloud Nine Un-Real Estate office there in your town. Instead, you have Wal-Mart and an awful lot of undeeded property floating by in the sky.

Alas, I wasn't the first to come up with the idea of capturing clouds on film. Late in his life, the photographer Alfred Stieglitz started making photographs of clouds. By all accounts, his illustrious career seemed to be winding down by 1915, but then something happened to reawaken his creativity. These days art historians argue that this rejuvenation was a result of aesthetic insight gleaned from the work and ideas of Picasso, the cubists, and other modern European artists. But I'm guessing it had more to do with Georgia O'Keeffe. The two met in 1916, and not long after that they became lovers. "She is much more extraordinary than even I had believed," Stieglitz wrote, in his modest way, to a friend in 1918. "In fact I don't believe there ever has been anything like her—Mind and feeling very clear—spontaneous—& uncannily beautiful—absolutely living every pulse beat." These

are the words of a man whose mind is socked in with the clouds of Cupid. Stieglitz, no doubt, had that ability to recognize kinship—even in the fog—and he acted on it, though it cost him a marriage of twenty-five years.

Over the next decade, he generated an extended serial portrait of O'Keeffe. Many of these images, which seem almost Tantric in intention, depict O'Keeffe in various stages of undress as well as fully nude. In these photographs, Stieglitz, who was fond of saying that he made love through his camera, was not only challenging the taboos of his day against public displays of sexuality, but also intimating dark possibilities of nature-magic and rank fertility. After all, he had been reading Freud, who proclaimed the human body is on the one hand sacred, consecrated, and a veritable temple, while on the other "uncanny, dangerous, forbidden, and unclean." Talk about a Counter-Earth! O'Keeffe's lean and taut body affected the aging Stieglitz mightily. "When I look at her," he confesses in another letter, "I feel like a criminal.—I with my rickety old carcass [he was a quarter-century older than O'Keeffe] & my spirit being tried beyond words."

It was right on the heels of making these erotically charged photographs of O'Keeffe (not to mention other women) that Stieglitz turned his peculiar form of lovemaking toward the clouds. The same creative energy (call it libido) that he had lavished upon making photographs of the female body was now released skyward, like a bunch of doves. In a 1923 letter describing his new work to the novelist Sherwood Anderson, Stieglitz comes off sounding like a lickerish adolescent, admitting almost boastfully that "after many days of passionate working—Clouding!—I stopped. I had to catch my breath."

In all fairness to him, it should be remembered that Stieglitz *always* talked this way when it came to his art. Late in life, looking back on a long career, he reflected: "It's difficult to understand today the passion and intensity I poured into Photography in those early years. I spent hours, days, weeks and months. Photography had become a matter of life and death." Freud called this kind of thing sublimation, "the instinct's directing itself towards an aim other than, and remote from, that of sexual gratification." Perhaps, but such claims are always dubious. The psychologist's words smack of a clinical interiority, just a little too walled in from the vast Outside that was the subject of Stieglitz's art. More in the spirit of these photographs, it might be said that the sky was the only place ample enough to contain a vision as grandiose, and as lonesome, as his; after all, he was an artist, one of those personalities, to borrow the words of the International Commission for the

Study of Clouds, "suspended in the free air and usually not touching the ground." Or, as Horace puts it, "I shall not die, my sublimations will exalt me to the stars."

Setting his own sights a bit closer to the earth was the great artist-ornithologist John J. Audubon, who upon arriving in the United States in the early nineteenth century felt "prompted by an innate desire to acquire a thorough knowledge of the birds of this happy country." Dressed in billowing satin breeches and fine silk stockings, he stalked the fields and woods of America, trusty rifle by his side, enthusiastically "collecting" birds and other wildlife so that he might sketch them in lifelike detail. In later years, he provided an account of his artistic technique, which first came to him in a dream. It involved inserting metal wire into the lifeless bodies of birds he shot in the field, then setting up the feathery mannequins and manipulating them into realistic poses. "Reader," he says, fondly recalling the kingfisher that opened the door to his success, "this is what I Shall ever call my first attempt at Drawing actually from Nature, for then Even the eye of the Kings fisher was as if full of Life before me whenever I pressed its Lids aside with a finger.—" After this, his passion blazed forth into professional ambition, and, using the same method of shooting and wiring, he set himself to the task of depicting every bird in America, the results of which are still to be marveled at in his massive books.

Perhaps most poignant in all the work of John J. Audubon is his description of the passenger pigeon, once the most numerous bird on earth. Flocks—or should we say dense clouds—of these birds were reported over a mile wide and, by some estimates, over three hundred miles long. They numbered in the billions. Remembering the autumn of 1813, Audubon writes: "The air was literally filled with Pigeons; the light of noon-day was obscured as by an eclipse." He goes on to recount hordes of people out in the Kentucky woods, with horses and wagons, guns and ammunition, there to shoot pigeons. In just a few hours, tens of thousands of them were slaughtered. Some of the dead birds were gathered for the market, but most were left to lie on the forest floor, where hogs were turned loose to feed upon the carcasses. What the hogs missed, bears, raccoons, possums, and vultures scavenged. Anticipating readers' distress at the news of this bloody havoc, Audubon assures us that nothing, barring the elimination of the forests, could do any harm to a species as numerous and as fertile as the passenger pigeon. Alas, he proved less able a prophet than a painter. The last passenger pigeon, named Martha, died alone in captivity at the Cincinnati Zoo on September 1, 1914. Now when we read

Audubon's words, not a bird but a ghost is evoked: "When an individual is seen gliding through the woods and close to the observer, it passes like a thought, and on trying to see it again, the eye searches in vain; the bird is gone."

One day toward the end of his life, after gazing on the mists rising from the Hudson River, Audubon turned to his easel to begin painting. A curious thing happened. The morning sun failed to burn away the low-lying clouds, which indeed seemed to be thickening around his canvas. Yet when he looked up, the old man discovered everything at a distance was bright and clear. The mist was not in the atmosphere but in his eyes: his vision was failing. When this phenomenon persisted over the next few days, Audubon realized that his career as a painter was over. During the next few years, perhaps as the result of a stroke, dementia set in. As one old friend put it: "The outlines of his beautiful face and form are there, but his noble mind is all in ruins. It is indescribably sad." Audubon withdrew further and further into the dim recesses of himself, until he no longer recognized anyone around him. His kinship now was exclusively with the dark.

Perhaps this is the way of all true artists. They're like the old druids and Moses and maybe anybody who is madly, passionately in love: poking around up there in the sky, looking for something beyond reach, calling out to it and hoping it responds, so that, should it draw near, they can pounce on it. There's a certain impossibility in all these endeavors—to fix the future, to behold a god in all its splendor, to capture nature in its bare reality, to embrace the loved one forever. Isn't it the case that all who reach for the sky are bound to come home empty handed? "What can poor mortals say about clouds?" lamented John Muir.

Dorothy Norman, long-time assistant to Stieglitz, reports that not long before he died, Stieglitz was asked, What is the perfect photograph? He responded by spinning a fantasy in which he himself had just taken that perfect photograph and was now holding the glass negative in his hands, reveling in his accomplishment. "It is exactly what I wanted!" the artist exclaims. But suddenly the glass slips from his hands and shatters on the floor. "I will be dead," Stieglitz concludes sadly, "and no one will ever have seen the picture nor know what it was." The moral of the story seems to be that there is no place for perfection in this world, a view consonant with Plato's famous assertion that no sensible person would try to express his or her grandest thoughts—those thunderheads of the mind—in a form that is unchangeable.

In this regard too I think of John J. Audubon, blasting away with his rifle at his beloved American birds soaring in the limitless sky, that he might bag a few ideal examples of each species and immortalize them in his art. Yet when all the birds are shot and all the drawings complete, each specimen splendidly depicted across the immense pages of his glorious books, did old John J., suffering the dementia of his last years, "his mind all in ruins," cast his hazy marksman-artist eye upward through the bird-free sky and gaze longingly upon those high and companionable clouds, the only things now remaining between himself and heaven?

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