

Windblown Clouds

EXCERPT No. 2

Low Cloud Pierced by High Mountain

Having been invited to live in the stone monastery atop Mount Pantokrator, the highest mountain on the Greek island of Corfu, by an old monk, the monastery's sole inhabitant, I become his first companion atop the stony peak in over four decades. The following excerpt takes place after the monk goes on an overnight journey to a nearby village to perform a ritual, leaving me alone for the first time on the mountain.

Late that afternoon I was writing at my desk when I looked up from the page to see the room being plunged into darkness. I glanced out the window, but the window had fogged, or so I thought, for all was a uniform shade of dark gray. I could see neither the stunted trees in the courtyard nor the building on the other side. I opened the door, but that did nothing to better the visibility. A cool blast of heavy, foggy air rushed into the room, saturating the room with moisture; I felt my beard and it was wet.

Crossing the threshold, I entered the dense, windblown cloud, which penetrated my skin and burrowed deep into my bones. Walking to the low wall beyond the kitchen, I was met straight on with a full-force gale, a gale of pea-soup fog, of low cloud pierced by high mountain.

The fog defined a circle through which my eyes could not penetrate. Beneath me the wall faded before reaching the rocky slope, and even my hands looked less sharp than they had inside. Before, all had been keenly defined: my hand holding the pen, the pen's sharp point touching the paper, the letters forming into words on the page. It had all been so clear, so black and white. I knew how one word would be followed by the next and how upon the foundation of the last the next would build. But that continuity had been broken. The light had dimmed. I had stepped outside into opacity, a world at once less defined and more immediate.

Here was no intermediary, no screen through which the mind could pigeonhole reality. Here, at the edge of a sea of nothingness, clutching a wall that faded into insubstantiality, my feet anchored in a ground that seemed no longer foundational, the mind was bypassed by the marrow.

It was as if I were the lookout on a ship's prow, peering into the shadowless obscurity, looking for a nuance of something tangible by which to guide my ship. The mist, like a continual spray, drove the

water deep into my clothes and made me shiver. I awaited the massive wave that would crash over me. I awaited the shudder that would resonate through the ship's hull. But no wave came. The rock beneath my feet remained firm, though it faded so quickly from sight.

Then came an opening, a crack in the fog. I was staring straight up the edge of a vertical column of cloud, a puffy cottony wall, towering, threatening to tumble hundreds of feet onto my head. The top glowed pink, red, and golden from the sun, which was setting, no doubt peacefully, beyond the tumult. It was a sudden reminder of the continuity of astronomical cycles unaffected by the happenings down below. Then the column closed, and the circle closed in on me again.

I went inside to find my jacket. I put on my hat and gloves. The simple passing of clouds, which from a village along the coast was a fleeting phenomenon of the sky, was from the monastery a spectacular event full of immediacy. This was the layer of the atmosphere in which warm and cold met and played out their battle. From where I was there was no observation, it was all participation.

When I went back out to the wall it was as if my ship had been dashed upon the shore: I was on an island surrounded by a sea of white, a white of turbulence and change. The cone of Pantokrator was bathed in the last reddened rays of the setting sun, clean and shining as if it had been washed by the cloud. But my island illusion didn't last, for suddenly the sea lifted in great puffy veils of movement and engulfed me, leaving me submerged once again.

Then, as if the great sea that I was in the bottom of was parting, hues of blue peeked out high overhead and the sky was revealed again, only to be obliterated a moment later by a wave of crashing cloud. From being a creature of the land, upon an island in an expanse of white, I became a creature of the seas, practically drinking the air through my mouth-gills. Then, as the clouds parted, I became a creature of the sky, an eagle soaring high over the island of Corfu.

Each time the sea of white opened around me I could see a line of clouds growing in the distance, boiling internally and mounting to terrific heights. And as the last light of the sun faded, these nearing clouds shone with flashes of their own light. They were thunderheads coming my way, and before them the wind howled. The air became charged. And just before the wall of seething cloud slammed into the mountain, the wind, which had been rushing out ahead of the storm, suddenly switched direction and started rushing toward the cloud. The oncoming thunderhead was consuming the surrounding air, sucking the air into it, sucking the mountain into its sphere as well. Suddenly I was in the middle of the seething cross-currents of the cloud's interior, my skin bitten by rain driven horizontally now over the monastery wall.

The ferocity of the storm drove me from that wall into the courtyard's interior. Wind and rain buffeted me from all sides. It was all I could do to keep my balance in the whirlwind. I huddled against a wall just to feel something solid, something rooted in the earth, something unchanging.

Gusts eddied around unseen corners, hitting me like the disembodied souls of the monastery's former inhabitants. They came out of the gray like cool hands upon the back of my neck, making my spine tingle with waves of sensation. With my mind unhinged by the tempest, I did not know whether it was from the cold and the wet or from these hands whipping out of the whirlwind that these waves of sensation flowed over me. I turned with a start, certain that someone had tapped me on the shoulder. But the same gray was staring back at me.

The rushing wind made the monastery's mute stone speak. The top of the monastery wall moaned with a hollow sound, and the buildings howled furiously, as if scores of multi-pitched and out of tune strings were being played with varying intensity by a thousand bows. No one string could be discerned out of the mismatched chorus. The droning in my ears never reached a crescendo, never found resolution as the ever-rising wind drove the cold and rain ever deeper into my bones.

The whole while that I was being tossed by the storm, enclosed in a tiny ball of gray, stumbling like a nearsighted fool, walking into walls and being buffeted by the eddies of wind forming off the corners of the buildings, I was aware too that I was over half a mile above the sea, over an hour and a half from the nearest human being, running around beneath thick walls, on a mountain in the center of a thunderhead. The whole while I was in the thick of it I was also strangely outside of it, aware—graphically, spatially, with the clarity of looking down on a topographical map—of exactly where I was. While never losing for an instant the sharp immediacy of my surroundings, I could practically see the great globe itself and where I stood on it.

My greatest security came from knowing I was within the confines of high stone walls that had weathered the storms of over half a millennium. But this security faded when the distant rumbles I had taken little account of grew louder than the howling wind. Fear overtook me as the thick fog became illuminated with blinding flashes of light that lacked direction of origin, flashes that illuminated equally my entire field of perception with a ghostly light. Flash followed flash, followed by echoing rumbles.

I decided to take my bearings and head inside.

But it was too late.

A crash of unimaginable magnitude shook the mountain to its very foundations, a crash that was concurrent with a blinding flash that rendered my eyes useless for a few agonizing moments, moments during which another clap of thunder crashed around me followed by another and yet another. The lightning bolts were distinct now through the thick fog, arcing less than a hundred feet above my head. They were close enough to gauge their thickness—thick as a man's arm, thick as a horse's torso. Others originated below me and shot up the side of the mountain, branching directly overhead. Their zigzag paths were etched on my retinas, etched in burning red.

Panic seized me to the marrow, wiping out all sense of sport I had felt toward the storm. It was no longer a playful game to be walking in the tempest. So I ran, trying to anticipate the next bolt of lightning. I knew if I stopped I would be hit. I ran like a jackrabbit dodging the hunter's shot, all the while hearing the boom, boom, boom from all directions. I came to a high wall and ran alongside it until it turned a corner away from me. I missed it, ran straight on, and was again at sea without an anchor or point of reference.

The storm rendered my will inoperative; in its place was pure and raw instinct, an instinct as old as time itself, the instinct that calls out from the primal depths for shelter. I became a being in search of a cave, a niche, or a burrow in which to find protection from the storm.

And then, off in the distance, I heard, between claps of thunder, the eerie sound of something ringing. I ran toward the sound and it became more distinct. I recognized it: it was the bell that hung over the monastery's front gate. What manner of being could be out on a night like this? It must be the monk. He has returned, found me missing, and now he's calling me back! Or perhaps it was more of those cool hands that had brushed me on the back of the neck.

I followed the sound to the gate. I stared into the flashing darkness, searching desperately for an outlined figure. But no figure was there beneath the bell, just the rope flying in the frenzy of the wind. The storm itself was ringing the bell. Knowing now where I was, I quickly found my room and slid in through the door.