

from *Still Life with Clouds*

by *Maria Mudd Ruth* © 2013



“A Guide to the Sky”

One October morning a few years ago, a cloud grabbed me and wouldn't let go.

The strange encounter occurred in the dim front hall of a friend's house where I was waiting impatiently to give her a ride to the train station. I had been waiting a lot that year and the year before that.

In fact, I had been waiting three years for this very moment—to be grabbed by an idea for my next book. I had been writing natural-history books back-to-back for the past twenty years, but suddenly found myself not writing. The problem was not a lack of material. Every square inch of life held a lifetime of stories. I didn't want just a story, however, I wanted the one that arrived in a full-body epiphany and with a flash of certainty and a spike in blood pressure. I wanted my story to sweep me off my feet and to keep me aloft and afloat for a good long while.

Shortly after the publication of my last book in 2005, I moved my family from sunny Southern California to Washington State where, under the influence of gray skies, rain, and good coffee, I believed I would find the next subject for my book—something that would anchor me in the Pacific Northwest. I searched, researched, explored, thrashed, leapt, waited, paid attention, meditated, considered this, jettisoned that, read, wandered, floated, and flailed. Nothing worked. A year went by, then two, and I hadn't gotten used to my new home state, the weather, or the fact that I was a writer not writing. But I kept at it.

It was Monday morning at 8 o'clock. I had planned to spend the morning reading, then taking a long walk with a Moleskine notebook and golf pencil in my pocket, ready for my muse. But there I was standing in a dark hallway with my coat still on, jangling my car keys, irked.

My friend was still packing her bags. She was moving around in the back part of her house—from office to bedroom and bathroom—opening drawers, stuffing things, zipping things. She didn't need my help, so I just stood and waited. She made a brief phone call and then stuffed and zipped some more. I was certain she was going to miss her train. What was taking her so long?

Irritated by my own impatience, I took a few deep breaths and tried to relax my shoulders.

Waiting. My entire being is waiting. I am waiting for a friend. I am waiting for my erstwhile muse to speak to me, to hand me my next story. I am waiting to be a writer again. I am also waiting for that moment when my irritation leaves my body, for the moment when I am no longer waiting, but simply standing still. After 30 years of practicing yoga, this should have been easy, even relaxing. But I could barely manage.

I looked at my watch. I worked on my yogic Mountain Pose but it morphed into a Mountain-Waiting-to-Blow Pose. I turned my head slowly to the right to look over my shoulder for a gentle stretch. Then I turned toward my left shoulder to face a closet door just five feet away. And there were the clouds.



Upswept, sideswept, wind-whipped, storm-tossed, towering, floating, moody, luscious, almost edible clouds—clouds with enough energy to blow out of the four-by-four-inch squares that confined them to the poster that covered half the closet door. Large white letters above the clouds read “A Guide to the Sky.”

In sumptuous whites and grays and yellows and lavenders and pinks, dozens of clouds sprawled themselves across skies so perfectly blue they made my eyes water. In heaps, blankets, towers, sprays, streaks, and wisps the clouds dominated the photographs and dwarfed the landscapes. Deserts, beaches,

farmland, mountains covered at the bottom of each photograph. Even skyscrapers and church steeples seemed puny beneath the clouds.

Suddenly, I was no longer waiting. I wasn't even aware that I standing in a hallway. I was so riveted by the clouds that I had forgotten where I was or why. I was simply there, uplifted, gazing at the clouds, floating.

I stepped closer to the door and began reading.



*CIRROCUMULUS: When this high **cloud** forms it can give the sky the appearance of wind blowing on a pond of white water. This cloud is often seen on the fringes of storms and, after a spell of fine weather, signals a change.*

Indeed, these ruffled white clouds looked like a white, wind-blown pond. I had heard the name 'cirrocumulus' before, but knew nothing about them. Nor could I recall ever noticing such clouds in sky.

CIRRUS (floccus): These clouds initially appear as bright white specks or compact tufts. After several minutes however, the brightness fades, leaving icy "ghosts" which betray their low temperatures and high altitudes.

CIRRUS (uncinus): A cluster of ice crystals in the form of a hook or tuft forms the top of the cloud. The larger ice crystals, having fallen below the tuft, are being left behind.

I didn't know what *uncinus* meant or how to pronounce it, but these cirrus looked like jellyfish—a roundish top bell with trailing tentacles. I had never seen these in the sky. Had I never looked or were these clouds rare? Cloud by cloud, I awoke to my own ignorance. Everything I read was news. I was appalled.

Each caption contained the name of a type of cloud type (more than I knew existed), its general appearance (bulging, fibrous, patchy, vellum-like), and the weather it portended (fair, unsettled, stormy). The four-line captions were graceful, fluid, and dense—almost like poetry, words that seemed light but carried the weight of many meanings. Graceful, fluid, and dense with meaning. Clouds. Poetry. Standing there in front of the poster, they felt one in the same. Together, they silently invited me to spend time with them, to begin the careful work of understanding their intentions, and to discover what they mean.

At the bottom of the poster were several blocks of general text.

“When compared to the earth’s size, the layer of atmosphere in which all clouds form is not thicker than the leather cover on a softball. Within this fragile layer is a myriad of continuously evolving forms of that most ubiquitous and amazing of all substances, water. Water, unlike most substances on earth, exists in all three phases—gaseous, liquid, and solid—within the tiny range of atmospheric conditions found here on earth. Due to this “versatility,” clouds can suddenly appear and disappear, and “precipitate,” pelting us with rain and snow. While these events are commonplace to us, in a cosmic sense, they are nothing less than miraculous. And there is still considerable mystery...The sky itself, where we can most easily appreciate these miracles, can be a joy, revealing something new every day if we would but look.”

I stopped there. *Look*. It was another invitation. I went back up to the top of the poster and started again, letting my eyes float slowly from one cloud to the next, caressing its surface with my eyes. That's when it happened. That's when one really grabbed me.



The cloud was labeled “cirrostratus.” Unlike all the other clouds, it was a white, lackluster, unshapely, and unphotogenic. A real smear of a cloud tucked behind low hills and a line of firs in a dull patch of alpine scenery. A swath of two-lane highway ran from the foreground of the photograph into the middle ground where it vanished around a curve. This photo struck me as the work of an amateur—someone who had pulled onto the shoulder to photograph a chipmunk scurrying across the road, missed the chipmunk, captured the road, and, unwittingly, some clouds. Why was included on this poster among so many dramatic and beautiful clouds? I looked to the caption for an explanation.

CIRROSTRATUS (fibratus): It had been a good vacation day. Rounding the corner, however, you become upset. You see the solid layer of high, icy clouds on the western horizon. You know that the weather will deteriorate. The perfect sunlight will be dimmed within an hour, and it may rain within 24.

How very odd.

A *good vacation day* and *perfect sunlight* didn't belong in this poster. Neither did anyone who was *upset*. *You* who? Wasn't Science written in the third-person, objective, and passive voice? *You* is second person, immediate, personal, urgent, and imperative. Hey, *you*, get off of my cloud. Who did this second-person voice belong to?

I read the caption again. The writer clearly had a sense of humor. Perhaps this was a private joke, an allusion to a vacation gone bad, a story of a certain someone (the passenger? the driver?) overreacting to the

cloud. I tried to move on to the next photograph and caption on the poster, but I couldn't look away. My heart started to race. Who wrote this strange caption and why? I felt a spark, a flame, small questions billowing into a larger story.

Squinting toward the fine print at the bottom of the poster, I noticed a few names, an address, and a phone number in Seattle. Perfect. A local mystery. I reached into my purse for pen and paper to jot down the phone number. The instant my finger tips touched a pen, my friend called out that she was ready to go. Her long-awaited appearance now seemed abrupt and untimely. I froze. I was trapped. Now what?

I wouldn't have time to explain my urgent need to jot down some information so I could track down a caption writer—it would have seemed absurd. I didn't want my friend to miss her train. The poster wasn't going anywhere. I'd come back another day, jot down the name of the publisher, and uncover the story behind the caption. I looked up as my friend walked toward me.

“Ready?” she asked.

When I withdrew my hand from my purse, my car keys were it in.

Euphoric, I drove my friend to the station.

She made her train.

I had rounded a corner.

I was being swept off my feet.



Two weeks and several dead-ends later, I had tracked down the caption writer. His name is Art Rangno, a research meteorologist now retired in Tuscon. We scheduled a time to talk by phone.

After a few questions about his research, I nudged the conversation toward “A Guide to the Sky.” Rangno was not only the writer but also the photographer for all nine editions of the cloud poster, which were published by SkyGuide in Seattle. From 1987 to 2005, Rangno sold more than half a million of his cloud posters to

teachers, cloud lovers, weather watchers, and many of his colleagues in the Atmospheric Sciences Department at the University of Washington.

When the time was right, I blurted out my question.

“Why did you write the caption for those cirrostratus clouds in such a...ummm...*quirky* style?”

“To see if anyone was paying attention!” he said, without hesitation. “You are the only person who’s ever asked about that caption.”

He sounded a little outraged that no one was reading his captions or learning about the clouds, but simply admiring his photographs. Rangno also sounded a little pleased by the attention to his writing, as little and as late as it was.

When I hung up the phone I felt a teeny bit exceptional (a feeling which I did not like) but very much on fire (which I did).



Photo credits: Top (cumulus cloud) by Maria Ruth. All others by Art Rangno from his poster, “A Guide to the Sky”