

The Last Cloud

Because the polar bear was crazy, he did not think it out of the ordinary for a great surge of water, for no good reason at all, to flood his moderate habitat and lift him skyward, up to the clouds he knew only as figments for his imagination. He rode the surprise current with careless abandon, taking it completely for granted, because, again, for him, a polar bear who was crazy, the ride was not remarkable—not in the sense that he ought instead of riding it, to remark over it.

The mysterious waters were a deep shade of blue, like glacial runoff in the arctic, where the sky itself is frozen in the ice. The coldness of the liquid made the polar bear feel correct for the first time in his life, as if at last, in the quickened beating of his polar bear heart, he could detect a true rhythm synchronous to nature. He spread his forepaws wide, swatting in exaggerated slow motion, stirring the pleasing element with all its tiny ice traces awhirl like dust motes in fluid air.

For the polar bear this unsolicited swim was, in fact, like flying. He soared up and up, from his original perch in the heat-blistered weeds beside the moldy concrete tumble blocks and pillars, higher into full view of the topmost tire on the jeeringly anthropomorphic jungle gym, as if glimpsing his captor's likeness one last time before reaching a final elevation which could only be freedom.

The polar bear stepped onto the first cloud with total confidence. It sagged slightly, but accepted his full forward weight, stretching in response. Neighboring clouds rippled like the

surface of a lake. The polar bear stepped onward, from one to the next, shaking the water from his soaked white hide very vigorously, releasing what for men below on the street was called rain.

"How can I find the last cloud?" the polar bear wondered. He looked right and left with great extensions of his neck, pausing in both directions. There were clouds as far as his swimmer's eyes could see. "It's one giant ocean," he concluded, pursing his lips with an air of determination.

The sun rose and the polar bear recognized it as the last cloud, far in the distance, the horizon's front door. He began to lunge off in that direction, kicking off each traversed cloud with his back paws in such a way as to leave only foggy shreds behind him, like a tattered welcome mat, a slow kaleidoscope of writhing white asps. He got closer and closer to the sun until it began to glow in his eyes.

Because the polar bear was crazy, he did not know when exactly he stepped into the sun, only that here was the last cloud, and here he was inside it. It was warmer than he expected it to be, but the heat had a pleasing effect of moistening him with his own sweat, which he mistook for the cool waters that first lifted him. He lay down in a small puddle and lapped his tongue listlessly toward a shimmering reflection of himself. He was self-conscious all of a sudden, aware that polar bears don't sweat, but pant; that his paws were not furry, but hairy.

The polar bear stood up on his rear legs. He put his hands on his hips, assessing what had happened, critically thinking. He scratched his head and began to pace the shrinking

diameter of the evening sun. He felt the rays diminishing in intensity, saw the world weaving shadows all around itself. An unfamiliar action commenced in the polar bear's body: incipient shivering. He rapped his thin arms around his naked torso and set his teeth chatter an incantation resulting in stars.