

## THE CLOUD CATCHER

Darvy Corm sits under the vermiculate limbs of a dead gumtree and contemplates ways to catch me. His father waits at the flyscreen, gaze fixed half-way between the reality of now and the horizon of possibility. He has waited eight years and his eyes are full of the blue of me. Darvy has waited all his life for a formal introduction. But Darvy Corm's eyes aren't combing the Southern skies for a sign I might deign to visit. His eyes are narrowed in calculation.

That morning I'd shaded the sky a naïve blue, and each small stratus cloud unspools like ink through water, dissipating after no more than ten minutes. Darvy crunches back on the stubby grass and watches the sky winnow through the clouds. The grass under Darvy is blanched and drier than most bottled herbs. He lies with the care of a fakir settling over a bed of nails. A discarded book rests beside him, the

spine facing skyward so I can read, ‘*The Modern Hunter’s Guide to Wild Game: Methodologies of Capture.*’

I consider myself fairly warned.

Like all good hunters, Darvy already knows a little about my heralds and auguries: the black trickle of ant migration, Aunty’s snaps of arthritis, the white cackle of newly-installed cockatoos. But he reads on and formulates his plan.

On Monday I stretch out the sky until it’s the heirloom blue of a wool blanket, and Darvy tries to lure me. Forewarned off playing on his mother’s hills-hoist, the dead gumtree in the garden—more carbuncled and withered than a fairy-tale crone—becomes Darvy’s official home base. It spent its leaves long ago, leaving confetti-dots curling sadly over the ground. Now it punctuates the garden with bark fingers contorted in frozen agony, beseeching the heavens. Darvy is as callously impervious to its death as Yultiders are to Christmas trees.

From my aeriform height, the tree is a melanoma on the raw skin of the earth. Darvy bedecks the broken-spoke branches with every shade of blue his family’s wardrobe provides. He pulls apart cotton balls and disembowels toys with the fervour of an Aztec priest, stringing the contrail stuffings through the tree tips. To Darvy, the tree branches out into a giant mobile of spinning clouds and flapping sky. From above, it now resembles a starburst firework. For smoko, Darvy helps his mother bake *meringue-de-floccules*, hanging several on the gumtree in oblation. They are just as hollow on the inside as my Monday clouds.

On Tuesday, the day feels mummified with heat, and Darvy tries to bait me. I notice a polyester dome of umbrella canopy moving purposefully across the front yard. More open umbrellas cluster in neon mushrooms at the gumtree's base. Hoses snake across the lawn in fat coils, ending in geyser spouts of scalding water. I think more of volcanoes and erupting lava than rain.

On Wednesday I colour the sky gas-flame blue, a butane blue, and Darvy fails in his attempt to woo me with a serenade. He knows the rhymes for rain in Spain, but he stumbles with original poetry for 'drought'. He thinks of only of:

*Lout.*

*Doubt.*

*Gout.*

*Sauerkraut.*

None of these are good things.

Instead he uses a Youtube guide to make a rain-stick from a toilet-paper roll, dried rice and toothpicks. As he crafts, he plays a Spotify loop of my best hits: rain pattering like distant herds of tiny hooves; popping like corn over a hot tin roof; the occasional cymbal-crash of lightning and timpani-drum of thunder. When he turns his own finished rain-stick over, it sounds like an arcade pinball machine.

On Thursday, clover scabs on the lawn's crust and Darvy tries reverse psychology. Which is a departure from the book's advice, but an inspired approach, nevertheless.

He sings a spritely rendition of ‘*Rain Rain, Go Away,*’ building into a hoarse crescendo on his eighteenth repetition. His taunts lack conviction.

At night, Darvy humidifies the bathroom, creating a hospitable environment to entice me into his indoor ecosystem. In the mirror’s filmy glass he looks like me: wispy, nebulous and insubstantial.

On Friday the sun has all the colour and bite of aged cheese. Its heat stays in the farm’s metalwork overnight like a charged battery, zinging through Darvy’s skin as he slides the cow-bail over the milker’s head. The Jersey’s liquid brown eyes are small, shrivelled like sultanas. He leans his head against her xylophone ribs and the milk is hotter than an espresso.

By eleven p.m. the night still can’t counter the day’s heat. Darvy sleeps outside on the trampoline, elevated on his polypropylene mesh altar. He whisks his limbs over the weave like a static angel, raising the fine hairs on his body. Flickers of neon blue arc from the bug zapper on the verandah. It pulses staccato, raining decrepitated insects on the green frogs underneath. In the distance, a steel drum contracts and *gongs*.

He looks for me in the sequined night and wonders if perhaps rain is a nocturnal creature. But I am noticeable in my absence. To Darby there is no sky, no atmosphere, no layers of safety to separate earth from space. The bright lights of galaxies seem almost as close as clouds. That, should the trampoline bounce him too high, he could float away to another planet. There are clouds on Venus, he has

read, and they rain acid. Jupiter has bright neon rain, while diamonds rain down on Saturn. As Darvy ponders precipitates a star streaks across the sky, a sly wink. It fizzles up in my mesosphere; a tear dashed; a raindrop extinguished.

On Saturday I pattern the clouds in a cirrus of fish scales, and Darvy loses his patience and shoots me. He doesn't much understand the theory of cloud-seeding, but he reasons things—such as rain—leak out of holes, so he endeavours to provide them. Climbing into the gumtree's serriform arms, he waits for the lowest cloud he can aim for. He has only an air-rifle, but he sprays one round of scatter-shot into the air. He worries he has spooked me, but judging from the faint sound of smashing china, I am not the one startled.

His mother runs out of the house, half sobbing, "Ronen! No!"

Darvy points the air rifle safely at the ground and asks his mother what's wrong.

She slows down, holding her hand to her chest. "I thought — where's your father?" She gives Darvy a look he requires a few years more experience to interpret. Currently, he know it's meant to be anger, but her face looks strange because it's happy too, like when his Dad climbs down from the windmill after oiling it.

"What have I told you about firing close to the house?" she snaps. She takes the slug gun and locks it back in the gun cabinet. But she keeps the key tucked into her chemise strap, along with her battered tissue and ragged heart.

On Sunday morning I unroll a bolt of litmus-blue sky and find the Corms taking an impromptu trip in their puddering Hino Briska. Darvy's Dad drives his family to town, blazing past the welcome sign to come out the other side. And still he keeps his mountain-range knuckles aligned over the steering-wheel. The car rattles like a box of tic-tacs. When Darvy and his little sister ask where they're going, his Mum tugs on her seatbelt strap and replies, "On a trip." His mother's way of looking at it invokes forward-planning but really it's just Darvy's father driving until he found somewhere it was raining.

It takes nine hours until they find me.

If I hadn't been raining there I think Darvy's father would have kept rolling Queensland under his tyres until he hit ocean.

At first Darvy thinks of fire.

He spots a faint glow backlighting the horizon and leans forward. His seatbelt is made from the same black material as the trampoline, but it nibbles at his neck like a bandsaw's kerfs.

"Is that a bushfire," he asks, "over the hill?"

His mother's smile refracts from the rear-view mirror. "It's the city." Her answer doesn't fully reassure Darvy: a place can be both a city and also on fire. But there are no flames licking up the city. Quite the opposite, in fact.

It's raining.

Bright lights drip down the buildings and slicks over the roads like running paint. The gentle hiss of traffic wringing rain from the bitumen sounds like waves breaking against shore. Every puddle reflects illumination. It's light and water all at once. Light in water. Water in light.

In the city, Darvy learns, there are lights to tell you when to do everything. When to stop, when to walk; circles and arrows and rectangles and letters flickering and flashing and buzzing. Like his bug zapper times a thousand. Like rain on Jupiter.

Darvy's Dad stays in the car.

He needs reminding of what I look like, smell like, sound like. But he won't allow direct contact. Ronen Corm barricades himself behind a glass pane while his children dance in the rain. He watches his wife herd them like a collie as I twist lowlights of shade into her blonde hair. He watches as I streak rain drops down the windshield of his car. He watches as Darvy pulls out an open bottle, clear as the open air, and catches two rain drops and me inside.

"What have you caught?" asks his sister. "Is it a bug?" His mother employs passive-listening, ready to free any captive fauna.

"It's the rain." Darvy answers. His mother's ears relax.

His sister taps the glass like a marine exhibit. "Does it need air-holes?"

Darvy looks at his sister like she suggested trepanning her own cranium.

Just then his father calls them back into the car, and there they sit, little tempests of water and shivers, while he turns around to drive home. I am tapping at windows in Madrid, thundering a charge across a Virginian plain, and being blinked out of a street vendor's eyelash in Turkey. And I am here, trapped inside Darvy's jar that still has sticky residue clinging to the sides, and a yellow lid that smells faintly of Cottee's. And to think I laughed when the blowing winds were captured by Aeolus.

"Could we stay?" Darvy's sister whines. "Have a holiday? We're already here."

"Can't," her father grunts. "Animals need feeding."

On the journey back Darvy shakes my jar like a snow-globe. I am mist and vapour. I bruise, billow, reform, roll and rage against the glass. All the while Darvy watches me, studious. At that moment he looks very like his father.

Once home, I expect to be triumphantly hung like a laurel garland from the gumtree's branches. I am a Hunter's trophy, superior to animal skins and horns and heads. I am rain and cloud and sky-in-a-bottle. A genie in a jam jar. But Darvy's fingers grip the corrugated yellow circle of my sky and he... *twists*. One revolution. Two. And then the lid lifts, my sky opens.

On Monday Darvy Corm stands beside his father and waits.

And on Monday I pull the blinds over the sun, and I go to pay my visit.