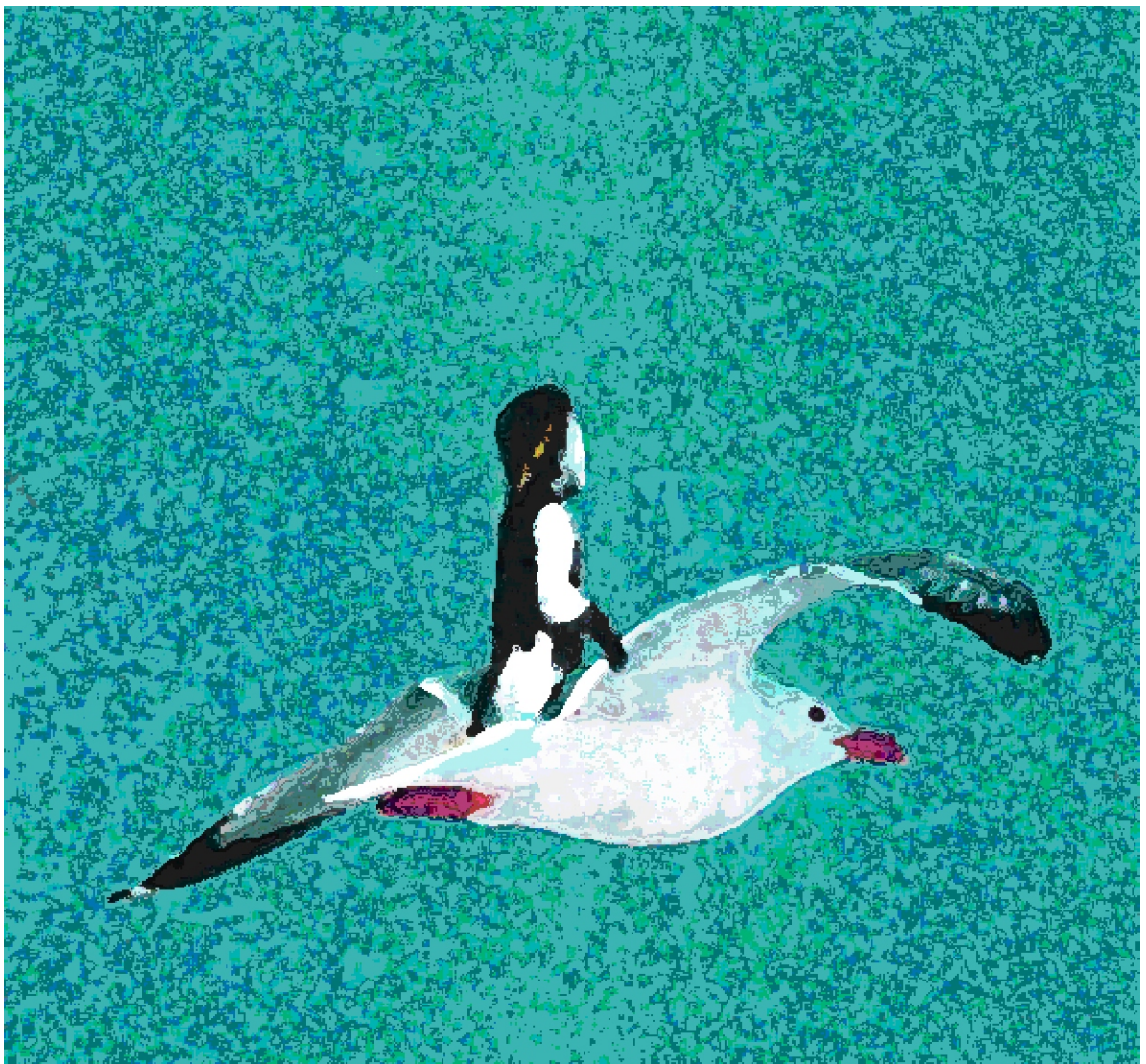


All along **down** the Sky





ALL ALONG DOWN THE SKY

Finn put down his skateboard and sat down with a “Humph!!” rubbing his sore knee resentfully. He was new to the housing estate and he'd spent the afternoon trying to find some friends. But the boys at the playground didn't like invaders and had found some pretty silly reasons to kick off a quarrel. Apart from that they had 'accidentally' knocked him off his skateboard a few times!

If only he could have stayed put in the big city with his old buddies! Now here he was way out in the sticks with no one to talk to, a grizzly new school and it was the end of the half term holiday. It began to drizzle softly and the unfriendly boys sulked off home. The playground was left to Finn and things got a whole lot quieter. Those kids should have stayed a while longer. Finn could do some amazing stunts on his skateboard!

After practicing some tricky turns he got home feeling whacked. It was around supper time and he'd been looking forward to a bit of Playstation on his dad's computer. But his mother was in a bad mood with him. There had been a letter from his new school saying that Finn's homework was never done and could she please do something about it? So Finn got a little upset and a bit rude and what happened was that he got sent off to his room before his dad got home. It was just 7:30 p.m. What could be worse?

Hmmm ... well, he decided to skip supper. He took a shower and got into bed with his favourite skateboarder magazine. The rain began to crash around. Lightning flashed, thunder banded and suddenly the world seemed to shake. He closed his eyes impatiently.

“Aw, it's just a freak storm,” he told himself. But time went on and things didn't get any better. The din became so loud that it started to become scary. Finn crept up to the window and peeped out. It was a dark night. Black leaves whirled about and beat noisily against the window pane. The suspicion crept upon him that somehow bits of the whole world outside seemed to be being thrown around by a Very Angry Somebody!

“I wonder if that's Mr. Triggs from next door,” he thought miserably, trying to find an explanation.

“Seems to be hopping mad! It's a pity about his greenhouse - but it wasn't my fault really... the football sort of went in that direction. What could I have done?”

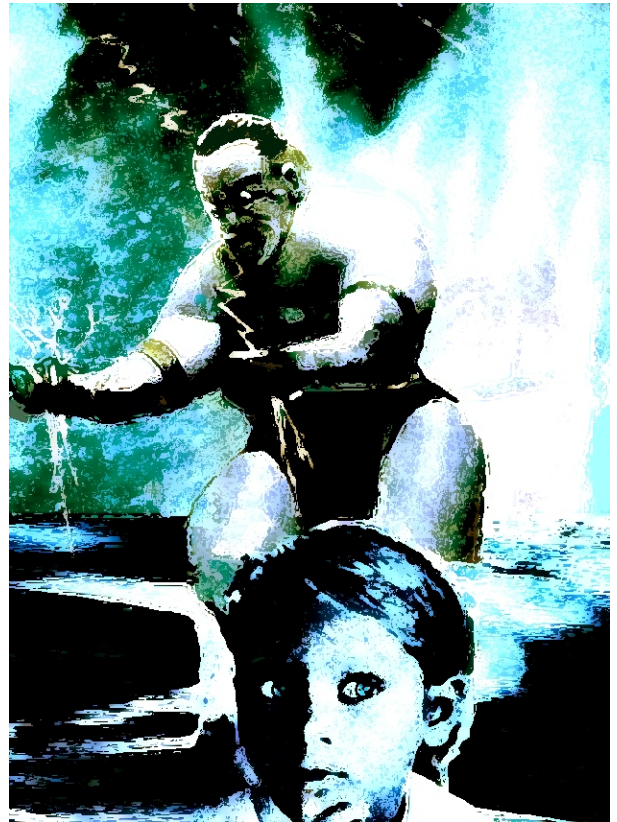
He was just thinking he'd have to pay for the repair by doing a newspaper round when there was the most terrific bang which rocked the house. Was it an earthquake? He opened the window and peeped fearfully out. Well - what he saw would take anyone's breath away! A low whistle escaped from him.

First he thought it looked like ... a bird? Then he thought it was more like an enormous dog, then it looked more like a ... ?

What-ever-it-was was black and blue from crashing around up there and it plucked large hailstones from the sky and threw them down right, left and centre. Roof-tiles were flying everywhere. Clouds scuttled by like packs of black sheep. Finn could not believe his eyes.

The thing seemed to have some kind of human shape. Electricity crackled from its fingertips lighting up the houses ... He heard scared voices calling out: "Hey, look! old Thunderhead's in a foul temper tonight! Now we're for it!"

"Thunderhead?" squeaked Finn. The sky looked grim. "Take that! And that! And that!" the thing yelled, striking out all around him with fists and feet. "I've had enough of all this calm and quiet business. It's time you all went underground and stayed put!" His hair lit up and as Finn watched streaks of lightning fizzled to the ends of it and burned out with a sharp hiss. "Wow! I really am seeing things!" Finn gasped. The trees screamed as they lost some of their branches. They entwined their roots together underground and wished desperately for better weather.



There were even more horrendous crashes and yells and bangs while the loud voice roared out "I'll burn you all into ashes, I will!"

At that point the boy nervously decided to close the window - but it was too late. The wind was already inside the bedroom and howled around lifting the sheet off the bed, and throwing his magazines around. A burning stone whizzed past his left ear and landed smouldering on the mattress! Finn ran to rub the sparks out. He slammed the window shut and got into bed, retrieving the flying bed sheet and pulling it right up over his head! "They'll never believe me in school tomorrow," he thought in despair. He reached for his Walkman put the earplugs on and turned the volume up full closing his eyes tight. But there was no way anyone was going to fall asleep that night!

It was getting on towards morning when the storm began to show signs of easing off. Finn was just about to snatch a little sleep when the window suddenly banged open and would you believe it, in flew a screeching flock of birds! And what happened next?

Well, they picked him up by his pyjama top and lifted him right out of his bed.

"MUM!" he yelled but no mum came. "Let me go!" he bawled. But it was no use. Off they flew with him straight out of the window!

They carried him far above to where the sun was just appearing in the dawn sky. As they rose it started to shine in a wonderful way and the birds let go of Finn. He dropped fast for several anxious moments.

"I'm a skate-boarder!" he protested. "I haven't got a parachute!"

And just then he landed! Landed? Well, not exactly. He blinked and stared. He was lying on something very soft and fleecy. But unfortunately it wasn't his bed. He could see fantastic swirling shapes of fluffy stuff flying all around. Was he on a bit of cloud? The thought made him feel dizzy. He closed his eyes in dismay. A light wind rippled through his hair, then a shadow slowly passed across his eyelids. A plane? Finn opened his eyes. No, but a heavy, winged thing all the same. It circled overhead. And it wasn't Thunderhead.

He looked more attentively. All he could make out was an enormous pair of cheeks puffed full of air. Somewhere in between protruded a lazy mouth that nonchalantly blew a pile of fat clouds across the sky.

Finn waved, roaring out recklessly "Hey you, could you help me? Plee-a-se! ...PLEASE!"

The thing dropped vertically for several moments, then it sprang up again with a swirl and edged up close. A big eye looked deep into a little eye. "What in the world are you doing here?" it asked in a whistly kind of way.

"Not much," said Finn in a very small voice. His throat dried up and he desperately wished he was back home

The windy shape took a deep breath and then seemed to unwind a teeny bit.

"Alright ... I'll put it another way ... how did you drift up here" it inquired. The air seemed to boom. Finn tried to explain about Thunderhead ... the birds ... the storm ... and then his brain went funny again. It all sounded so far-fetched!

"Ho-Ho, so Thunderhead's up to his old tricks again!" the thing said stroking its feathery hair thoughtfully. "Well, I must admit that he can even drive me bonkers if he has a mind to! I'd like to send him packing once and for all - together with his gang of miserable black clouds. I really would! It's a blue skies world I'm after!"

"Who are you?" Finn asked respectfully lowering his eyes. The shape billowed up. "Can't you see?" it puffed itself up and a big gust of blue air escaped. Finn was almost blown away!



"You're just a great big balloon of air," he said trying to be brave.

"Of course I am! I'm Zeph Westwind that's who I am - at your service."

The cloudy shape bowed its head. He seemed to drift off for a few miles but then he sprang back and said "You'll have to go, boy, I've got no use for people up here. You'll get in my way!"

"Whatever you say," Finn said agreeably, not daring to protest. He was rather worried about what was going to happen next. Seeing that he'd scared Finn, the wind added a little more kindly, "Look, I'll send you off to stay with my old Ma in the south. Now how would you like that? She hangs around the equator someplace. She's a little balmy - but then who isn't? If she's not blustering over me she's hovering over one of those tropics - Capricorn I think it's called - Southern Hemisphere, I believe."

And with that, Zeph took a sudden grip on Finn and leaped away downward with him, saying "But let's go get Thunderhead, first!"

Well, Mr. T. Thunderhead wasn't exactly hard to locate and they soon found him causing a terrific noise over a big city that was jam packed with cars and sky scrapers. He looked up reproachfully as they arrived.

"I heard what you said to that boy!" he said accusingly. "It's not fair! He glared at Finn. "You guys - you people creatures down there - you think you don't need me. But I tell you - if I didn't get things moving around here, nobody would! Zeph there - pooh! He's just a bag of hot air! He lazes around all day, blowing wishy-washy little clouds about when he can be bothered."

Zeph Westwind groaned in a laid back kind of way.

"Besides that," Thunderhead rumbled on defensively, "You've got to roar around here to get yourself heard or else nothing ever gets done! I make everybody jump when I get going, that's for sure! The sky bursts into tears! As a matter of fact - I quite make myself jump sometimes! In fact I can make myself quite, quite nervous ... The rain helps me cool down of course - she's a great friend. Known her for ages!" Finn almost felt sorry for him.

"You think that we'd all just sizzle up on the earth, if you two didn't come along every now and then and drown us, right?" he asked feeling a bit braver now than before.

"You'd better believe it!" thundered Thunderhead. "The place would be a regular furnace if that stupid Sun had it's way. You'd be no better off than a pack of dried prunes!"

"No rain? I see what you mean ..." Finn agreed thinking it over and falling noticeably silent.

Seizing the moment of distraction, Zeph Westwind took one deep blue breath and blew them all along down the sky - Finn, Thunderhead, black storm clouds and all! WHOOOOSH!!! Off they went!

They were blown over land and sea, by-passing screeching flocks of migrating birds or overtaking a lonely aeroplane now and then. After what seemed a long time they began to smell the fragrance of flowers rising on the breeze and looking down they saw the gardens of the south where it was high summer. As they floated onward they met a powerful turbulence. It slowly built up in the air and as the warm currents rushed to meet the cool they were slowed down and almost stopped by a mighty force. It was then that they saw ... HER.



Who? A shaky someone, withered and weathery watching them from afar. She looked at least a million years old. But you could tell she wasn't done yet! She whirled up to and around them suddenly. Round and round she whirled inspecting the newcomers. She was making herself quite dizzy while struggling to catch together her extremely untidy long grey hairs which were blowing about everywhere. She managed to bundle them all inside her cap and at that point she began to sneeze violently.

"I saw someone coming " she explained in-between coughs and shakes.

"Name's Silly ... er ... Sally Southwind ... rushed over fast as I could soon as I saw you two ... always do ... keep forgetting ... I've been told to slow down. Getting far too old for it..." She stopped to take a few deep breaths. When she had got her breath back a bit, she recognized Thunderhead who was trying to act as if he were not there.

"OHO!" she cried. She was looking directly at him. "So he's got himself sent back here again, has he? Well, I most surely am not going to put up with that! I don't want him here either! Always causing havoc, encouraging young hurricanes to get out of hand and trying to carry the seas away! There's never a dull moment! One sighting of him and my old eyes begin to water and my nose to run." Finn looked sorrowfully at her. She did seem to be unwell in spite of the wonderful weather.

"I just can't cope!" she explained. "Not with his tempests and depressions!" She puffed away moodily to herself for awhile until a malicious gleam came into her eye.

"The best thing is if he goes off to the subterranean caves of Antarctica. Apart from a few trainee volcanoes, no one minds his awful temper there!" She drew Finn to a side. "And you know what? I can make anyone feel drowsy when I blow ever so gently on a hot afternoon. I can make them forget their busy thoughts and fill their heads with lazy dreams." A sly glint came into her eye ... "I'll get rid of him alright - even if I have to drag him away through the ocean bed!"

But she didn't have to bother, because poor Thunderhead had caught the last part of the sentence. He was already pretty much in dread of the witchy old wind. He'd heard enough stories about her ability to cause sleeping sickness, loss of memory and even permanent amnesia!

"Er...begging your pardon, Ma'am," he began quickly, "Er.. I'll be on my way in a jiffy, if you'd just give me half a split second to adjust my bearings ..." The old crone cooed sweetly, pleased as punch. "As you wish," she said serenely. "However, the boy stays." Finn squirmed uncomfortably.

"Oh, I'd rather go " he said before he could stop himself, adding "Er ... home that is ... " in case he'd offended her. If only he knew where home was!

"Nonsense!" said the old girl with great authority. "You'll do as I say! It's a long time since I've had company and you'll do very nicely for the moment - at least until the arrival of my cousin Pernickety at the end of the warm season.

I won't bother you much - I've more than enough work keeping these wretched continents in order. I change the dawns and sunsets for them every day, you know - not that they appreciate it! And the sky gets a wash at least twice a week. I'll show you just what kind of work goes on up here!"

She noticed the worried look on Finn's face. "You may visit the Equator if you like. It's reasonably good humoured and I'll introduce you to the Six Directions. You'll see! You'll have a wonderful time!"

"Did you say six directions?"

"Of course."

"I thought there were just the four?"

"Some kind of school you attend!" she said with a humph!

Finn looked dumb. Sally prompted him: "Now come along ... there's Boreas in the North - not that I like him ... his name says it all. Besides that he's old and cold and standoffish. Er ... South - that's me I have a wonderful balmy nature. Then there's Austris in the East, she's known to be very distant and West ... well, you know Zeph! So that leaves just two ... " She waited patiently for Finn to say something. But not a peep came.

"Up and Down of course!" she said finally. "And as for those two - well they're neither here nor there!"

Finn couldn't argue with that. He saw that he was going to have to stay.

Luckily for Finn, once she'd managed to calm herself down a bit, old Sally Southwind was not such bad company. Things turned out to be highly interesting up there! Each day was a fresh new one to set up and as Sally said - it was a one off - never to be repeated. She flew like a bird and soared up and away watching over everything meticulously. She supervised as the high Cirrus clouds brought golden weather down to the right altitude. She kept the Nimbus lying low to refresh the fields and quench the thirst of the tiny flowers. She showed Finn where the fish and birds thrived and how the rivers ran, where the currents led. He watched the huge recycling task that nature undertook when trees and plants wore down and saw that they never really died off but were channelled into new life forms.

Long days went slowly by and Finn felt the wild air in a world that was free and ever changing. It seemed a place of mysterious and lasting purpose. He lost track of time. Sometimes he wondered why he didn't feel homesick - even when he thought about his favourite T.V. programmes but he really was just too enthralled. The witchy wind had given him a special task and that was to guide the cleanest clouds around making sure that they didn't accidentally wander into contaminated places above industrial areas where poisonous gases floated. They'd been used to wandering around as they pleased, but lately it had become harder and harder to keep them clean and in good health. "Take good care of them!" Sally Southwind warned Finn, "Or else they'll get the hydrogen sulphurs or whatever you call it down there and then the trees will complain about acid rain which burns their insides and there'll be no end of misery!"

When all her work was done the golden stars were called out slowly one by one and then the wise old wind sat down at her hearth fire to tell Finn some of the many stories that were still known about the origins of the world.

"My memory's not what it once was," she said. "I'm getting on ... so very very old ... older than mountains, older than seas." From the way she looked at him, Finn could see that it was true.

She explained to him then that the very first men had been born knowing how to call to every bird, animal and flower and that they could in those old days count on each other for willing help in times of need. But as time went on new generations of men came along and everybody forgot. Then the men thought that all things belonged to them to do with as they pleased. They fell into very bad habits and began only to see the living things as something they could hunt to eat or use. It was almost as if they believed that they had created the world themselves! In the end they even turned against each other, now only quarrelling about who was allowed to use who!

Like all gentle beings the living creatures then tried to hide away and stopped all communication because they saw the course that had been taken and were powerless to change it. They became terrified of humans and kept well out of their way because of their cruel character. Finn could see their point.

"I'd never have learned about all this if the birds hadn't brought me here," he thought. "I wonder why they did?" He remembered again the night of the storm. It was all so long ago. Then his mind wandered onto thoughts of Home to his Mum and Dad ... his skateboard. "I wonder if they missed me on my last birthday," he thought suddenly feeling down. A blue tear rolled down his cheek. He wished he could tell them that he really liked them and that he was doing okay and really having a lot of fun and not to worry. "They wouldn't have really forgotten me, would they?" he wondered sadly as he fell asleep that night.

The next morning he was woken up really early. There was a whirlwind of activity and Sally Southwind was rushing around even faster than usual. The silly thing seemed to be trying to tidy up but was really leaving behind her even more of a mess than before!

"The old girl's madder than ever," Finn thought. She rushed up to him yelling "Time's up! She's coming! SHE is on her way!"

"Who?" he asked puzzled. There was no reply. Just the clatter of falling dishes.

"What?" he tried again. Oops there goes the mirror. It shattered with a yell.

"When?" he asked, giving up. Sally breezed up to him. "She's on her way NOW - and I'll never be ready on time! She certainly doesn't travel light. And she's so finicky! Everything has to be just so! Or just so! There's no telling what she'll find fault with!"

Now who could it be? "Surely not Pernickety?" Finn asked. Sally almost screamed. "Pernickety? Yes, Pernickety!!! Why, she left the wide blue yonder days ago and will be arriving any minnit!"

Finn could still be astonished. It was breathtaking to watch how she huffed and she puffed around again not pausing for a moment.

"And that means you've got to go!" She said stopping suddenly. "There isn't enough Space!"

"Not enough space?" She had to be joking!

"Go where?" he asked. "Wherever you like, just as long as it's away," Sally replied curtly.

So, with the coming of the visitor, Finn could choose to return home. And when the guest arrived he realized that it wasn't going to be a moment too soon! She seemed to have eyes at the back of her head and there wasn't a detail she missed! She looked about herself clucking like a nervous hen, criticizing everything she saw, heard or smelt. She had been delayed in the Doldrums and was more than a bit irritated.

"I'm really sorry that you were so inconvenienced," Finn started to say, "But you know - there's just no telling with the weather it never makes up its mind until "

"Precisely what I say!" Pernickety interrupted sharply. "What's more - I'm told that you people creatures down there are not much better! You take after the clouds too, drifting hither and thither - never knowing if you're coming or going! Not a bit like me! I know my own mind! I've got eyes everywhere. I have to be up early - make sure the sun gets up on time ... and I tell you he's never missed a day yet... He wouldn't dare!" Blah...blah...blah... she spoke like a clock, tick-tock tick-tock. Poor Sally! thought Finn.

Finn was relieved to be going! But where was he going? And how would he travel?

He need not have worried. Sally told him that the birds would call for him again on their migratory trip back north and drop him off wherever they'd picked him up. Words choked up softly as he tried to thank Sally.

He wanted to say thank you for all the things she had shown him but she was in such a fluster ... She hardly heard a word he said! She bid him goodbye with a rough peck on the cheek saying gruffly.

"Don't mention it boy, see you next time ... keep alert."

"Next time, hmmm..." mused Finn. It was music to his ears. Yes, he'd be glad to be invited again!

He journeyed blissfully northward riding on a giant seagull which had been wintering in Zimbabwe for some reason and was returning with her friends to enjoy the northern regions. Over the clouds they flew and Finn could see the green buds on the trees below. The air was warm and the sun shone splendidly. It was springtime.

When they reached his home town, Finn was carried back down and through his open bedroom window and deposited onto his untidy bed. He ran to the window and waved goodbye to the birds until they were a tiny speck in the sky. How he hoped they they would return for him someday!

It was early morning.

"Hey, Finn!" sang out a familiar voice. He looked down astonished and who should he see but his next door neighbour, Mr. Triggs. He was inspecting his garden with a grim face. "Hey, just take a look at this mess!" he said. "That sure was some storm last night!"

Finn stared in surprise. Storm? Last night? What did he mean last night?

Mr. Triggs was still ranting on ... "Well, I guess the insurance will cover most of the damage! You know what? I didn't hear a thing! I slept right through it!" Finn nodded smiling a most secret smile knowing that he certainly hadn't!

He heard his Mum storming up the stairs to wake him up for school. Oh-oh the homework! He glanced at the clock. A quarter to eight. School!!! Things were back to normal. Or were they?

