

My Sky

Now that we live out under a big sky, a sky that rolls away forever, the farm sky, I find myself cloud gazing again. It's been a long time. I think all children at one point or another become aware and then amazed at the ways clouds form and deform themselves. First impressions "that looks like a face" are quickly modified and reformulated and the practice of personifying moisture becomes the invention filled pastime of hours. It seems universal, this joy in the heavens, seems innate.

And then the clouds are just clouds. They become the objects of more intentional observations, wind direction, weather prediction and flight plans. Somewhere in high school most of us stop wondering and start observing instead. There's a big difference isn't there? On the one hand the sky is all about story and pictures and on the other hand clouds are condensation. Of course, both points of view have their place. It takes the engineer *and* the artist to make a world.

In my case the demythologizing of the sky had as much to do with locale as it did with inclination. For years in big cities I strolled among buildings and the sky was defined as right-angled patches, squares and rectangles framed by cement and steel. It was up there for sure but not nearly so prominent as in the rest of continuously flat Illinois. Our years in the beautiful woods of Houston County presented their own telling of things celestial. In the woods the sky is for lighting and that's about it. While the canopy offers regular glimpses of the heavens they are limited and very specific. You learn to pick out which tree to look through when judging the weather. With a steep ridge to the east and dense woods to the west sunrises and sunsets, the stuff of song and paintings, were pretty much someone else's business.

But now, my goodness, now the world is retelling itself to me. I had no idea what I had put away. I had completely lost track of the dome. Now, there is the horizon that stretches from here to there and in between up there is a twenty-four hour, surround sound, Cinemax production recast every day and every day better than before. There are no more angles up there. The frame is now soft and moving made of prairie and spruce and corn and hills. The view is so wide that you have to turn to take it in. When you turn back the scene has changed.

It is a good thing that humans need to eat and to keep warm because our distant ancestors would have gotten absolutely nothing done if not for those basic needs. They would have spent all their time standing in the middle of the picture staring, open mouthed at the scene around them. They would have quickly perished, aesthetically full and physically depleted. Maybe that's why you never see landscapes in cave paintings. You see animals, tools, weapons and the occasional shopping list but never pictures of the sky stretching over the plain. It's just too big and if 'Ug' had tried to paint it he would have gotten lost in the process. How can you paint what is both in front of and behind you? The immense task would have swallowed him completely. No desire to forage and no time for a fire.

My sky has been a leaden gray for two weeks now. The atmosphere alternates between thick fog and steady drizzle with the occasional downpour for variety. In another setting this constant shadow would be a tad depressing but not here. Following the path of an oncoming shower from the eastern hills right up to our porch gives me great pleasure. It's as if I am just learning to measure distances, to judge velocity. The frame of reference is so completely different. It's all new. I'm a kid again.

What a gift this is. Here I am at the ripe old age of...many years and I'm walking around with my head tilted back. In the woods you look ahead and down when you walk or else you're likely to end up sitting on your back pockets sliding down an unseen slope. But out here the world is far ahead and decidedly up.

Just now the sun is peeking through and I need to sign off. Please excuse me for a while, I have to go look at my sky.