

## The Cloud

Deep in the stink of summer, the usual deafening buzz of insects, sirens, car alarms is suddenly punctured. A thud against the roof. Then another against the window. I peel off the bedsheets and stagger to the curtains. I peer out. A bird twitches on the windowsill, then expires. Another rolls off the roof. Dozens of them are dropping out of the sky. I look up the street as a mammoth dirt cloud looms over the buildings, sweeping through the city like some sort of biblical scourge. It gets closer, I recoil but curiosity gets the better of me. I put my face to the glass. Inside the cloud's peculiar shadowy bulk, dust and debris percolate as if the bowels of a giant vacuum cleaner have burst in mid-air. Fluff and hair bluster, suffused with rot, intoxicated by a mad freedom not of this world. It's a furious grey haze that relentlessly wafts forward, greedily consuming everything in its path.

Screams echo. People scatter. Warped streaks of lightning flash inside the cloud's bulging hulk. Flecks of plastic glimmer like stars. Suddenly everything is muffled and silent. I fumble for the TV remote – loud static. Nothing, except for one advertisement that keeps appearing on channels at random:

*Reclaim your freedom!*

*Oxygen. Anytime. Anywhere.*

*Get your starter kit and private supply now.*

*Be released by our new Portable Oxygen Concentrator.*

I rush downstairs and peep out into the street. The cloud is dragging its grey belly along the ground. Its mottled gel-like form seems as though a mountain of dirt has been coughed up and suspended, floating without logic or reason. Across the street, a long-withered face is pushed up against a window. Maintaining eye contact with me he nods in the direction of a canvasser who is suffocating in the middle of the road, her face plagued with open sores, her party leaflets strewn across the tarmac. Only metres away the cloud seethes. The old man's eyes bulge. He looks at the girl, then back to me, thrusting his chin at the window in panicked jerks. His jowls throb and quiver.

A pause. We both stare at one another. "Y-O-U...G-O...T-O...H-E-R!" I say, nodding mournfully at the girl.

"COWARD!" He yells. Thick spittle sprays the glass.

He withdraws, reappearing at his front door. He pokes his walking stick at the ground, shuffling towards the girl. She's stopped crying by now; her throat is horribly swollen, and her limbs twitch. He gets closer as she curls into a foetal position and twitches no more. Just as the old man reaches her, he too stumbles and collapses to the ground. Straining to lean up on his elbows, he thrusts a scrawny finger at me.

I pretend to answer my phone and back away from the window smiling sheepishly as the two bodies are consumed by the foul entity.

I watch on as it continues on its macabre course. Bits of plastic, bottle-tops, wet-wipes ridden with filth and cigarette butts hang in the air like strange fireworks. I cover all the cracks in the door with duct tape before going off to check other apartments in my block, ransacking any that I can force my way into, taking leftover food and medical supplies. I return to my flat, apply duct tape around the window seams and force a mattress up against the main door. I fill several containers with water before that too is infected. I put the radio on auto search for any kind of signal. I sit in the bathtub and rock back and forth.

I can hear a voice:

Life is a virus and you might be contagious,  
check yourself regularly.

Your dreams are vast, they burn small holes in the mattress,  
beware of house fires.

Don't become an extra in the film of your life, shred the script of mindless tyranny,  
throw away the TV.

There are many things to know, like, if a mirror doesn't reflect, is it a window?  
put your fist through and see.

Other people are just sheep waiting to be sheared, whereas you are a goat out in a field on its own, going mad,  
and life is a memory that is out of control.

All I hear next is a great wall of static. A furious rain batters the roof, thundering down like thousands of crashing lightbulbs. There's an immense fizzing noise as the cloud recedes with the same apathy with which it came. News reports start coming in. The phone pings incessantly. There are claims that the cloud has been neutralised over the North Atlantic with further details promised.

I look out of the window. Everything is shrouded in brown sludge. I layer up and prepare a breathing apparatus from gaffer tape, milk cartons, mesh, and sponge. I make an outer layer of plastic bags for additional protection. I venture outside groping my way through the hostile landscape.

Road surfaces have disintegrated. The streets are jungled with leftovers, all the waste that the marauding cloud had tried to ingest but ended up regurgitating. Mangy dogs gorge on bundles of faecal tissue masquerading as political literature; they find my appearance strange but unthreatening. A man is propped up against the Cathedral which now resembles a twisted upside-down umbrella; his limbs ravaged by a pustular psoriasis. He stares metal-eyed in my direction, humming some patriotic jingle. Draped around his slack-skinned neck is a tattered piece of cardboard with the words 'Great Again' scrawled across.

Heat rises from the pavements. It's going to be another scorcher.