

Birds

They say these things used to live in the sky- Birds they called them. These “Birds” flew high in the sky, free in the air. Different species than us, different colors than us, different habits than us. These mystical creatures are myths for us, but I can’t help but wish that I was a Bird.

Almost forty-three years ago, the American state of Georgia went to war with itself. The war went so far beyond the line of agreement that the state officials decided to split Georgia into three territories- Fomenter, Zealot, and Firebrand- and built walls to separate the three sides. They separated us from the world for the safety of everyone. Unfortunately, prior the walls, bombs had been dropped by all sides, causing the air to be toxic, fatal with one breath. To keep everyone safe and alive, the Elders (the leaders of our society) built the ACS, also known as the Air Conditioned Sky, an artificial sky that filters toxic air from Outside into breathable, safe air to be taken in by us.

When we look at the façade of ACS, we see the sky as the books and poems describe it: big lofty clouds and blinding light, bright, shining stars and the smooth moon at night. Its looks are pretty believable, but there are these small faults. If I look ever so carefully, there’s these warped, glittering pieces of the sky that remind me that we are trapped inside a cage, stuck inside a prison, confined inside a bubble, and can never escape.

Once, I asked my mother what it was like Before; she was a little girl then but still old enough to remember. “Stop being silly,” she told me, shaking her head disapprovingly. “Why would you want to know about that God awful place? That kind of thinking will get you nowhere in life and will only hold you back. Now shut your mouth and finish your porridge ration before it gets cold.”

Needless to say I don't ask my mother about Before anymore.

Everyday after my school lessons and on my way home, I always think about the Birds and what they would do if they lived in the city. What would they eat? We barely have any food (the rations we are given are just enough to feed us most times), so how would they get enough food to get the strength to fly home? Where would their homes be? On the ground? A girl in the year above me told me that Birds slept up in the tallest of trees, but I don't understand that. Trees must be uncomfortable to sleep in and make a home.

One day, after an especially boring arithmetic lesson, I walk along my usual trek home, thinking my usual questions about the usual myths, when I see the usual skyscraper reaching into the sky. I make my decision then, quick, but not irrational. I enter the building- knowing the government is watching me from the street cameras "for our safety" but for once I couldn't give a damn- and climb up, up, up, all the way to the top.

My uniform shoes *clunk* on the roof as I step out of the stairwell. I walk to the side of the building, *clunk clunk clunk clunk*, and look down below at the ants going through the motions of the day, naive what they are missing. I feel the ignorant wind against my bare arms as I slip off my sweater, leaving my black undershirt and navy uniform slacks.

As I take another step forward to get a better view, I think of everything my life has consisted of in my fifteen years: my sweet mother trying to protect me from the inevitable, my good-for-nothing father who left us nine years ago after telling us we're the bane of his existence, my friend who kissed me a few years ago and who then comforted at my tears after Mother beat me for "sexual" activity ("That kind of behavior isn't acceptable in my house!"), my

little sister Rosie who cries when she sees the daily bruises on my too-thin body. Lastly, I think of all the teachers who stare at me as I walk past them, the ones who are aggressive enough to corner me after class, the ones who smile when I scream for help, who smile because they know I could never get help in this society.

I close my eyes and take in chilly April air through my nostrils. I am determined. I will be free.

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I can’t help but to become a Bird.