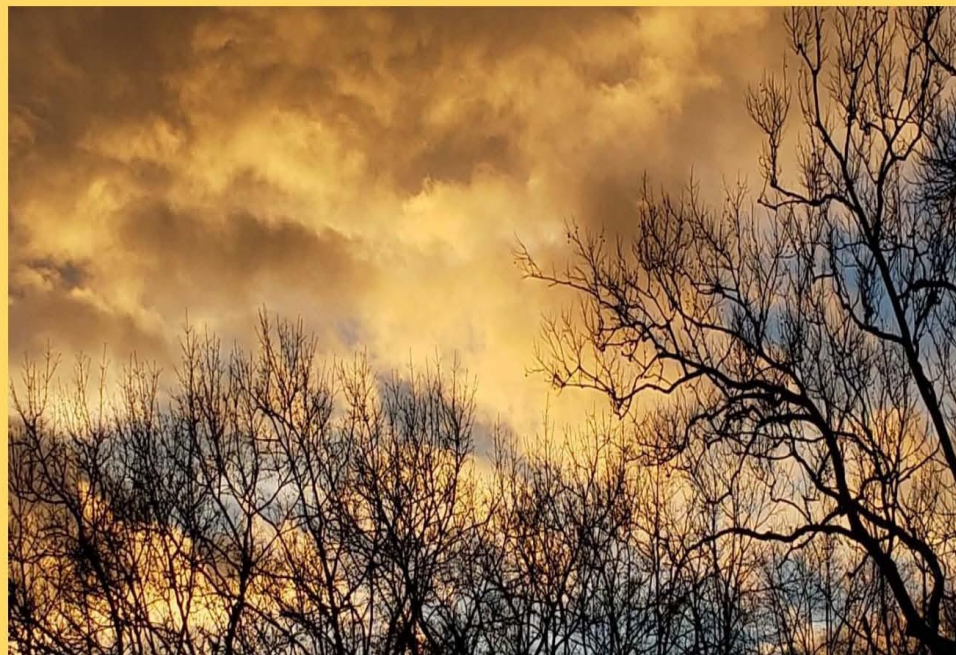


THE CLOUDHERDING BOOK



**photographs by
CHARLOTTE MANDELL**

**with poems by
ROBERT KELLY**

The Clouderding Book
is the fifty-ninth
in a series of texts and chapbooks
published by Metambesen.

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THE CLOUDHERDING BOOK

poems by
ROBERT KELLY

written to photographs by
CHARLOTTE MANDELL

Metambesen
Annandale-on-Hudson
2019



CLOUD ONE

It had to be.

The history of humankind
disguised as the sky.

The Norse called us gods
because we were so far
inside ourselves we might
as well be heavens away.

As or Os they called the gods,
that should mean Us, we live
in us-gard, our yard, and when
a woman looks up from her work
she sees the sky and cries There,
that is who I am, that's what I mean.

A man hears her and looks up,
asks Are there no other gods
but us? Of course there are
she answers, but they are far
and we are the ones we have to know,
reverence, build shrines to, adore—
pick up this stone and begin.

***But the sky is not on fire,
its color comes and goes,
color is the signature of time
on space, ask any piece of bronze.
No fire here, but where fire comes from
in its turn, it's up to learn where.***



CLOUD TWO

**The sky
is shy.
It doesn't do
to look at it.
That's what clouds
are for, to hide
reality. Just like art.
Distract you
from the endless
blue in which
even you could see
eventually
the throne from which
creation spills,
shivering echo
of the first thought.**

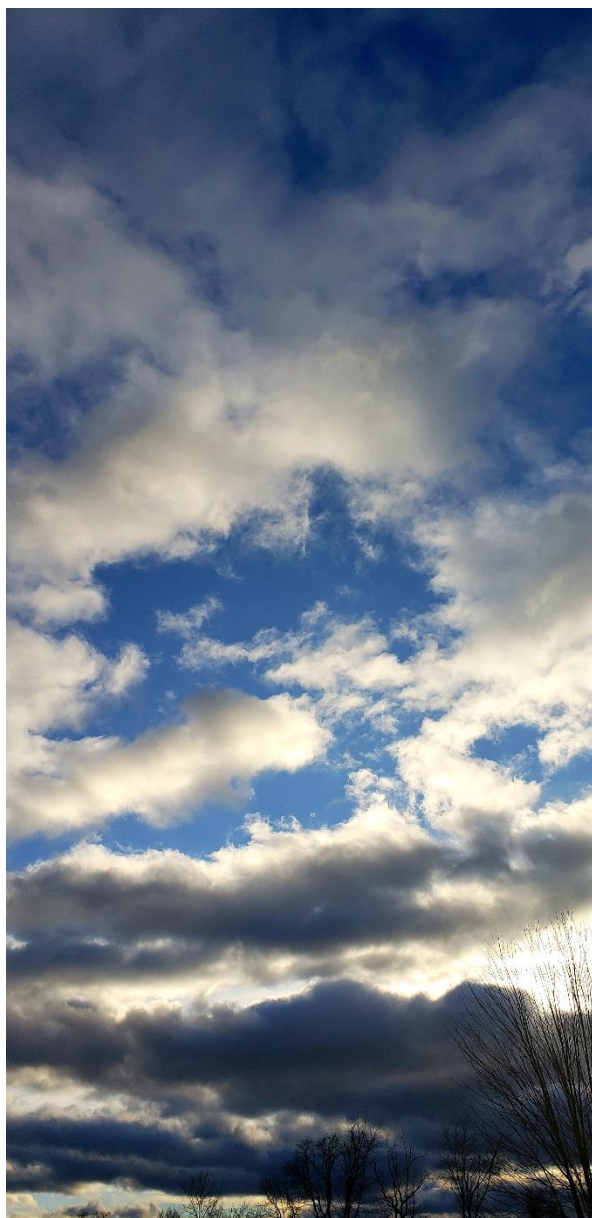


CLOUD THREE

**To know their names
to number them
in my broken alphabet,
fallen runes, loom
of light beyond the dim,
my home. I mean
I live up there too,
father thunder mother air
and me a twisted kid
between – how it seemed
to walk out of a house
and stare up there,
suddenly at peace, suddenly
where I should be.
All it takes is looking up.
And there it is, the singular
multiplicity of form and light,
ominous and innocent.**

**Let me tell you more.
let me guess at last
the long caress of light
and how cloud shapes it**

**to our need, need is another
word for bodies, we stand
here to be the point exactly
to which the light aims
ever and ever. The cloud,
this academy of shapes and colors
explained all this just now
so even I could understand.**



CLOUD FOUR

**The manna has fallen.
What the sky has given us
is in our hands now. Our bodies
grow strong from that
radiant opacity that condenses
the light so we may eat.
Something like that. I look up
and all my doubts see, idle,
nothing belongs to me, not even
these anxieties. What comes down
brings its upness with it. Something
like that. The color between
true and false has a name. Seems
almost a person of its own. I want
what I see to be a smile, I open
my arms wide and hope.**



CLOUD FIVE

**The dark knows us better than we know ourselves
the Gypsy said, quietly, as if his mind on other things
as he watched the tricolor of the momentary sky.
Everything wants to talk to us, he said, but I for one
get so tired of listening. He took some coins out,
weighed them in his palm, tossed them into the air.
They disappeared, like birds scattering at a gunshot.
But there was no sound. Just the sky, so dark, so pale,
and somehow like flesh in between. His skin, the skin
of my hand reaching so fast but not fast enough
to catch his nickels and dime before they vanished.
He smiled, looking back at me. Or were they silver?**



CLOUD SIX

**There are things between us and the night.
Jewelers call them diamonds, priests
call them prevenient grace. I call it rain
that eases my heart and teaches me to see
or not just see but see with a purpose:
what you see through water has to be true.**



CLOUD SEVEN

I read an emerald and it spoke like this,
As above so below is what it said.
It taught me to look down as I walk
and that way learn the language of the sky—
the things it waits for us to see.
So a tree in winter is a constellation,
an Arabic enigma that splashes my feet
as I shuffle along through the picture.
I hear a muffled sermon on complexity,
causality, the sheer pretty surfaces
of ordinary things. Birds are bees,
raindrops looking-glass, clouds
are our faces waiting to be born.



CLOUD EIGHT

**Over the everything a hand of light
shaping darkness. River, frontier
of a neutral country, we are safe.
Safe as trees, at any rate, sage as all
the words that we believe, that spoke
to us from childhood on, whispering
through our games, sneering behind
the boss's back. A hand of light
ready to shape the dark around us
as house and river, barn and tree.
Black angus cattle standing in the snow.**



CLOUD NINE

1.

A great dancer swims silence too,
knows when to stand still, still
a long time maybe, lets the eyes
of the audience move for her—
her body makes the ancient eye-dance
when she's standing still. Fact.
I have seen a pool of water
take in the whole sky, take
and make it quiver, shimmer,
while miles above the pool
the light stands perfectly still.

A great dancer uses stillness
the way music uses silence
to shape the *matter* of movement.
Only when she runs out of meaning
does she move again, subtly fast,
making space make room for her—
our eyes track her movements
so when she comes to rest again
we suddenly own the whole dance.



CLOUD TEN

This cloud like a tree
points straight up
at nothing in particular,
the particular nothing
that rules the earth,
light all over, waves
of gravity, spin us
in our place, keep up
where we belong. Blue
from which we descend
into the spectrum, only
bruises and some of our
eyes are still blue. Cloud,
so gentle, a pretty teacher
in her filmy dress, knows
all this, but like a good
teacher anywhere, smiles
and turns back to the text.



CLOUD ELEVEN

**Become us, sunset in the blood,
Easter when the dead wake up
and the afterlife reflects
above them in pure sky, white,
white, so nothing has been lost
of what they learned when they
— like all of us — sleep deep.
And now here it is, life again,
religion, lawcourts and marriages,
the world a pool in which
something else — is it more, is it less?
— gets reflected. We swim to heaven.**



CLOUD TWELVE

The horse leaps high.
His noble paladin
rides him to the sky.
Swords and whispers,
clamor, blue shouts
through bare trees.
It's hard not to hear
this kind of sky—lift
my arms, pretend
I too can leap
legendary into light.
Tree aping cloud, cloud
aping my aspirations,
what a family we are!



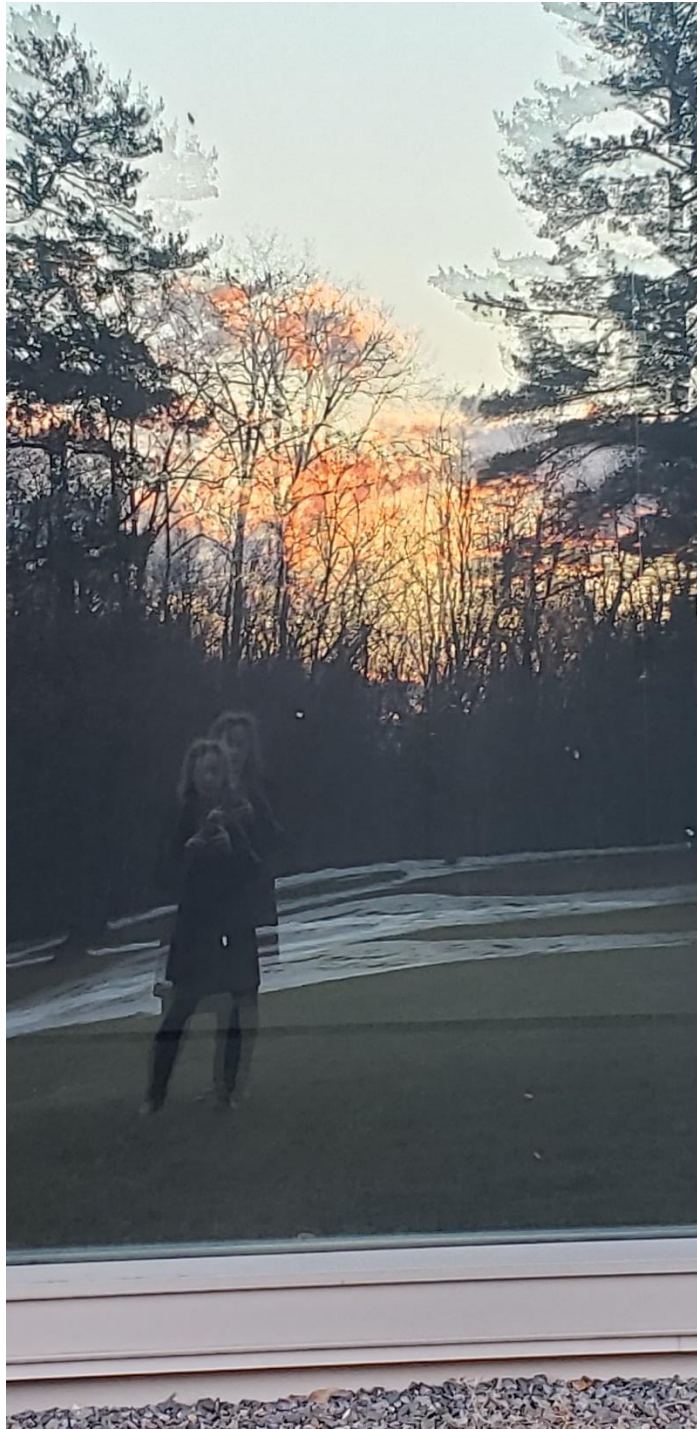
CLOUD THIRTEEN

Because I know so little of the sky
I think I'm staring at the continents of earth
long before thy found their proper dance
and took the places we now know them by.
I am distracted once again by sheer
resemblance, that arch-enemy of reality.
Just let me sit a while and look right through
the filmy edges and pale lake-like hollows
and see the sky as sky. This is what it says
today. Nothing about history, geography,
colonies, industries, homesteads, farms.
Just about now: *Look into my many eyes
and see the truth of your own seeing,
There is nothing here but what you see
and you beholding it – don't you think
that's miracle enough for anyone?*



CLOUD FOURTEEN

**Was it Rabbi Elimelekh of Lizhensk who said
People don't see G-d anymore because
they're always gazing up and never look down?
Down is where the earth and sky are
already wedded, energy within energy coiled,
articulate, released. Look down in this sly pool
the weather left here for our instruction,
look at the leaves floating loose, safe from
all their books, study their pale organic blankness
and hear the words that rise up in your lips
as if you read them, simple, like a child.**



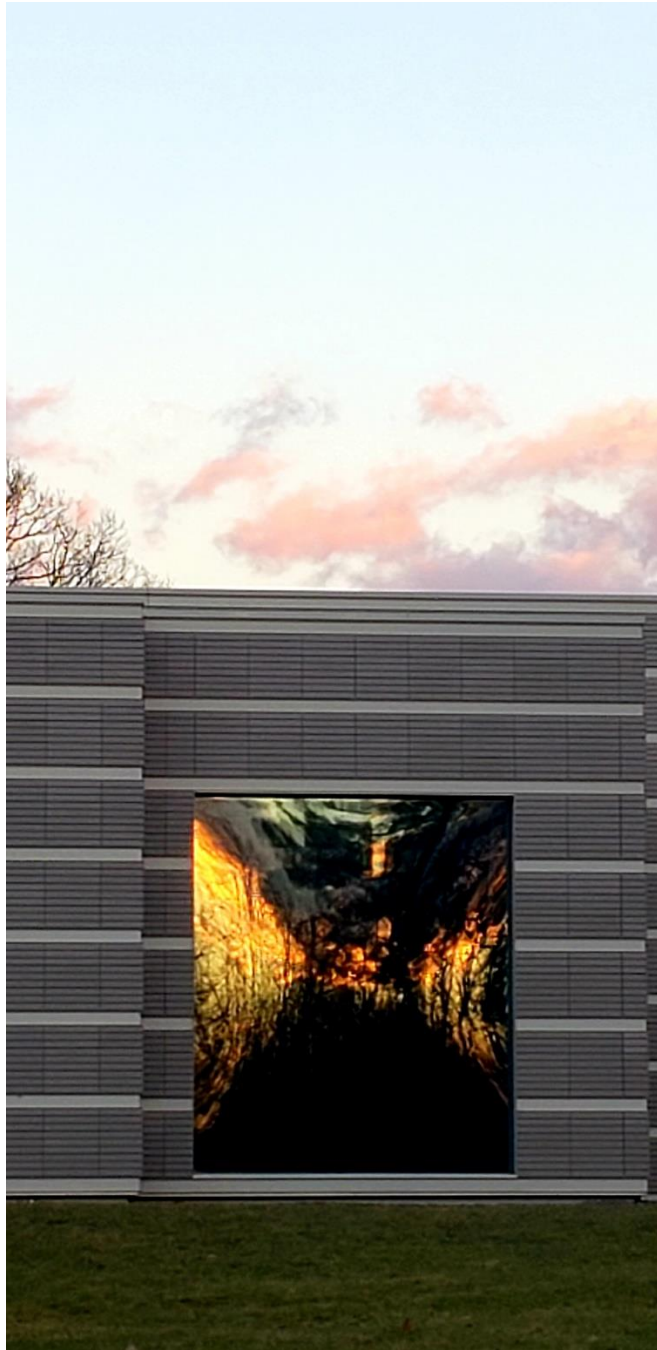
CLOUD FIFTEEN

**Reflection curves the face of the water
so it becomes more like one of our faces
staring up at the glory of the setting sun
through trees weather-worn to plumes
and arabesques. So much of what we see
depends on glass. And here the secrecy
of ancient sand comes into play, the bright
opacity made transparent, the rock
a revelation. It shines between us
and what we see. Evening, our stream,
our dream, water remembering for us.**



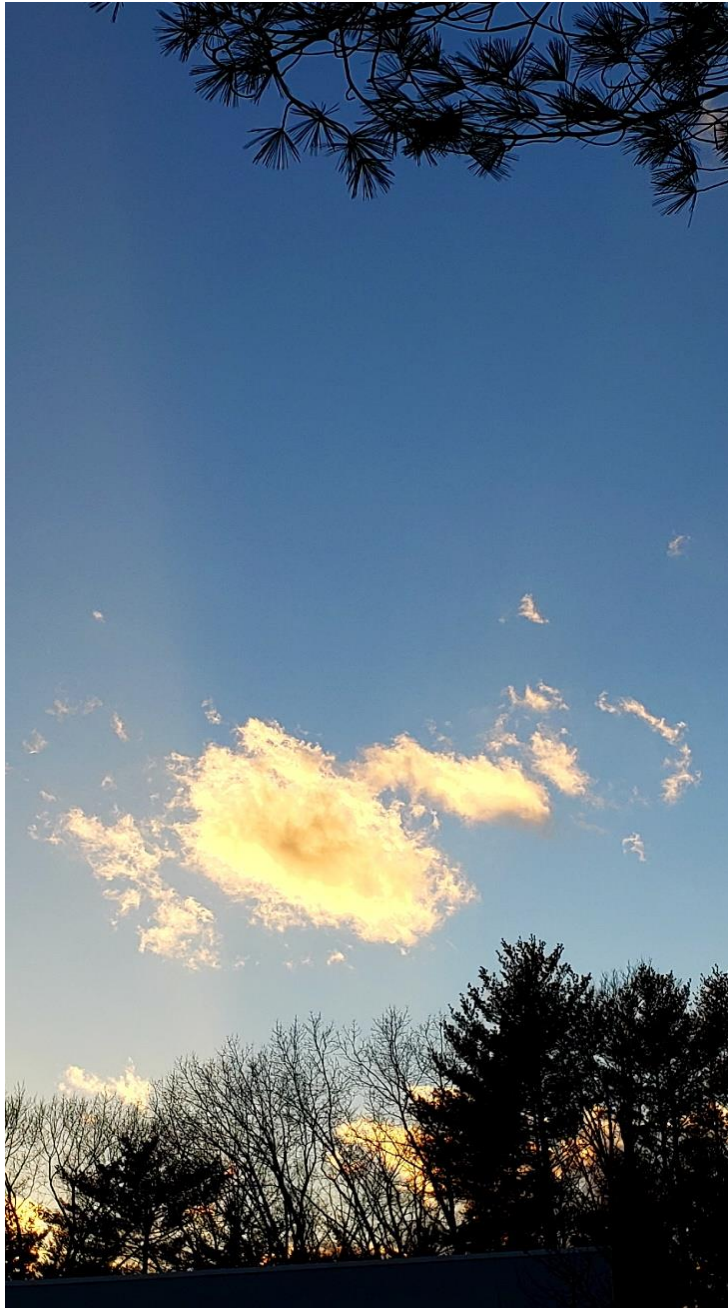
CLOUD SIXTEEN

**How from the dark the rapture rises
like an old hymn in a tumbledown church
or the quiet breath of a sleeping man.
So much left for us to do! Color the world!
All colors borrowed from the plangent light,
These clouds now, over Annandale, arrayed
to bring our message south, to the city,
eis ten polin! But what are we telling them
down there, what did we all of a sudden
learn from wool-gathering these pink clouds?
I'll wait for the city's word. A city always tells.**



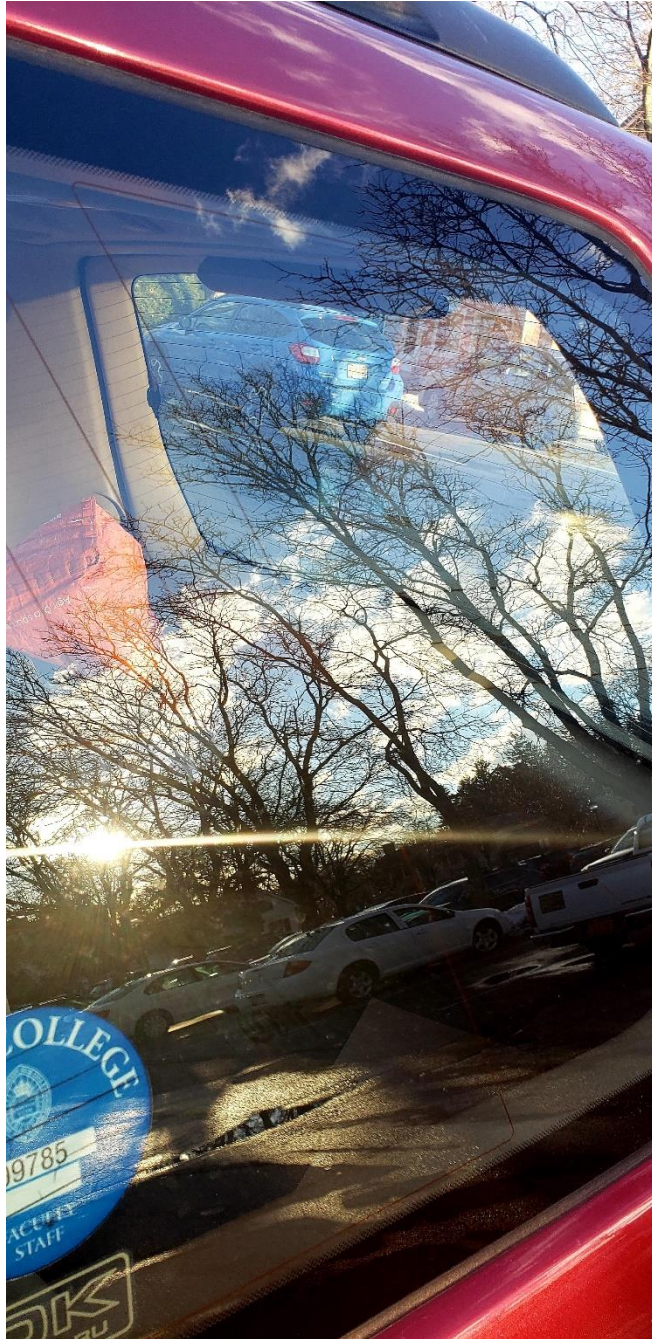
CLOUD SEVENTEEN

**could it be a building stands
to protect the sky
from what we think?
That early humans weren't sure
how far a word went
when they spoke it,
roof us over to be on the safe side,
yurt or wigwam or this stiff
industrial chic rhombus—
yet even we have enough sense
to let the sky look in.**



CLOUD EIGHTEEN

**If I too could only reach
that way into the blue,
that momentary absolute
the way tree reaches to cloud
cloud reports it to blue
and all the colors fall into place
as if we were children again—
real children, not the kind
we have now, precocious adults.
Real children, like Mozart or Bach
who never could stop coloring the world.**



CLOUD NINETEEN

**Glory! Our own car
brought the whole sky home
as if it were another person,
lovely friend, just there
a passenger. And now with us.
Anywhere we ever go
that friend will sit quietly beside us,
hands playing with light and color
as if the world outside itself
is just a reflection of her play.**



CLOUD TWENTY

**The lamp looks up.
Means light answers too,
not just the all-day question
that keeps us on our toes.
Water makes this happen,
living mirror, the thing
we drink that carries in it
everything the sky can show—
it is the elixir, mysterious,
natural, everywhere.
It even has a tree inside it.**



CLOUD TWENTY-ONE

**Hands held over us
sheltering. Dark thought
over light thought.
And in the core of things
a blue stone gleaming.
The softest stone of all
and the most precious,
lapis celestialis, dream
of a world on the other side.
The dark thought always
has this in mind, the light
thought says so. The blue
interior of every thought
gleams, gleams, the same blue.**



CLOUD TWENTY-TWO

**The alphabet of white
cursive across the mind
of anyone who dares
to stare up there, where
the trees are pointing,
mind gets lost in meanings,
multitudes, Moseses
dividing every sea, leading
every people back and forth
across the pantheons. This
seems to me to be what
the clouds are saying, every
people has its crossing over,
every human is a nation
to themselves. And I who
walk lighthearted under all
this white and blue, once
I was Pharaoh and you left me.
I have found you again, just
as easy as looking over the trees.**



CLOUD TWENTY-THREE

**You see, there is a sky
beneath us too. Witness
what happens when you
or even I look down.**

**At times it looks like marble
and you think of poor Otello.
Sometimes the grain is finer
as if the stars had turned again
to sand along your island's beach.**

**Just pray you have an island
with its sea, sand, winds,
legends everybody is beginning
to forget. Look down, the pool
of rain relents, lets you see
not it alone but what it sees,
up there, the impossible real.**



CLOUD TWENTY-FOUR

Anybody who grew up in a big city
know that every country road
leads into the sky. Witness this pale
shimmering snow-squeezed road
right near where we live. Upside down
world is natural to it, a lamp
leaping, a banner handing down—
a road interprets for us what we see.
Go there, it says, go there with me,
I will always lead you to the sky
and then protect you from it later
when it looks at you the way clouds do—
then I'll press upward on your feet,
your soles you call them, curious name,
but anyhow I'll press and you will know
and walk with me all the way home.



CLOUD TWENTY-FIVE

**If I were a dog I would jump in this
and roll around or lap it up
and then wonder where the sky went
I thought at last was mine
to become a citizen, or to consume.
But I'm not that kind of animal
yet it still makes me tender, senti
all over, to see this skin of heaven
lying on rough gemstones in our road.
Asphalt has a memory too, better
than mine I bet. It has the whole
sky to help it to remember.**



CLOUD TWENTY-SIX

**Cathexed with color
subtle as a tangerine
remembered while
you're drinking glass
of milk clouds
reflected. But where
does the acting color
come from, earth
or heaven? As we used
to call the totality of
what we cannot touch.**



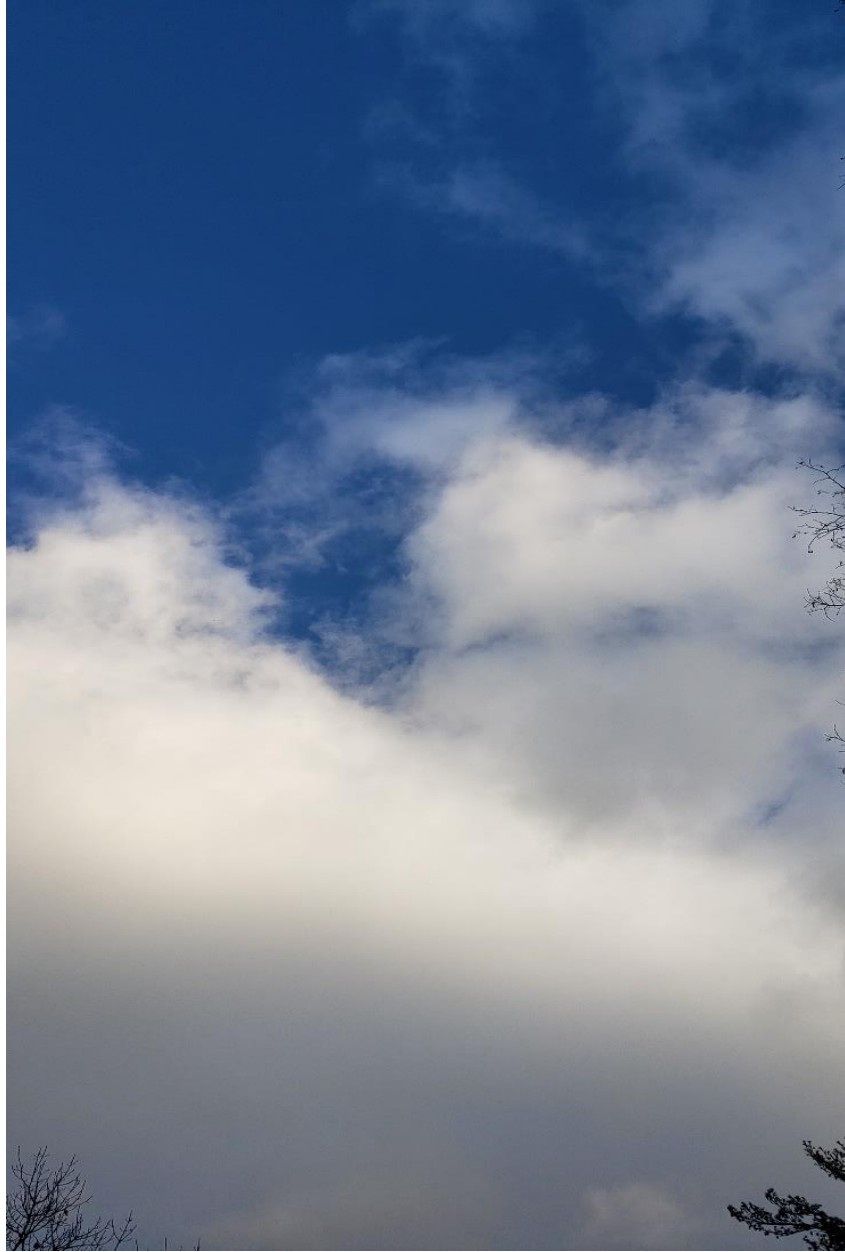
CLOUD TWENTY-SEVEN

**But now the sky creeps towards the ground,
we will stand on it before we know it—
yes, I'm coming from reflections here
but that is all we ever have, in eyesight
or hindsight or in the glimmering mind
hoping for things to know. In France
the THINK sign reads REFLECHISSEZ.
Reflect. Be water for a change, admit it,
water is what we mostly are, I forget
the percentage, running water purifies
itself in a few hundred feet, my father
told me. Means water has no memory.**



CLOUD TWENTY-EIGHT

And here we are at last—colonnades and winter gardens, our earth possessing us. Even mountains where you'd hope to have them, near enough but still up there, with wolves and bears and roads closed in the snow. And a river in between. River is *ripa*, shore, obstacle to walking further. Here the other element begins, *flumen*, it flows. The Hindus knew that clouds are messengers. Anybody who looks up at them knows that too. But no one knows for sure the voice from which those puffs of breath arise, take form, and float away, dissolving as we read them. Or try to. We build a formal world within the natural, then along come clouds. It says a lot for us that we still can be so bewildered by that beauty.



CLOUD TWENTY-NINE

**A little hand of one of ours
reaching up to all
that is theirs, the before us,
the truth of the matter
no matter how we spell it.
Blue. And all the white
between — thought
I think, theology, science,
the tumultuous beauty
of all our speculations.
Cloud. Never still. Cloud.
Listen, sisters and brothers,
we are the same size as the sky.**

CLOUD THIRTY

There is no cloud for me here
so this is a cloud I'm thinking
but I never found.

The sky doesn't need my inscriptions,
it has language of its own.

So I must find a paper sky
and scribe my way on it
as if I had the whole night
to write with, so much ink!

There is no end

to what we say—

that is the argument of every play,
religion, love letter, dissertation,
all we ever really know
of what we say. And so the sky
says Keep talking, stranger,
any day now you'll be making sense.

January-March 2019