

THE THERMALS OF AUGUST

Edward Bryant

I see the woman die, and the initial beauty of the event takes away my breath. Later I will feel the sickness of pain, the weakness of sorrow. But for the moment I sit transfixed, face tilted toward the irregular checkerboard of cumulus. The drama of death has always seemed to me the truest element in life.

The other diners see what I had detected a moment before: a tiny irregularity in the smooth sweep of the newly launched kite. The kite is cobalt blue and dart-shaped, apparently a modified Rogallo wing—not one of the Dragons we'll all be flying later in the week.

Having come to the outdoor cafe by Bear Creek for a late breakfast, I'd hoped simply to satisfy a necessary but unwanted need. Now, however, the bite of croissant lies dry in my mouth and the cup of coffee cools undrunk. Perhaps I did not really see the minute lurch in the kite's path. I allow myself that one brief luxuriant hope, staring at the kite and its pilot more than two thousand feet above the valley floor. The kite is a vivid midge against the lighter blue of the sky.

Then the kite falls.

I see the craft first slip into a stall, then nose downward— no problem for even a moderately experienced pilot. But suddenly half the wing folds back at an unnatural angle. In a little more than a second, we on the ground hear the twang and snap of breaking control wires and twisting aluminum frame.

The kite tumbles.

I am surrounded by babble and one of the other diners begins to whimper.

It seems to take forever to fall.

My brain coolly goes to work and I know that the descent is far more rapid in terms of feet per second than appears to our eyes.

At first the kite fell like a single piece of confetti pitched from a Wall Street window. Now the collapsed portion of the wing has wrapped around pilot and harness, and the warped mass rotates as it appears to us to grow larger.

The crippled kite twists and spins, flutters and falls like a leaf of aspen. I think I see the shrouded form of the pilot, a pendulum flung outward by centripetal force.

The kite's fall seems to accelerate as it nears ground, but that also is illusion. Someone screams at us to take cover, evidently thinking that the kite will plunge into the midst of the outdoor diners. It doesn't. The kite makes half a final revolution and spins into the corner of the Conoco Building. The cocooned pilot slams into the brick with the flat smack of a beef roast dropped onto kitchen tile. The wreckage drapes over the temporary barbed wire fence protecting this building under perpetual reconstruction.

The bit of croissant still lies on my tongue. I feel every sharp edge. I gag and taste bitterness coat my throat.

The dead moth corpse of the kite is not more than fifty feet away, and the crowd slowly begins to close the distance. I am among them. The others grant me a wide path because most recognize that I too am a pilot. "Let the woman through." Gingerly I approach my fallen comrade.

Her body is almost totally swathed in the cobalt fabric of the kite. I can see her face; her eyes stare open and unpeacefully. The concealed contours of her body are smooth. I suspect most of the bones of her body are splintered.

When I softly touch one of her shoulders, I inadvertently drag one tightly folded flap of kitewing against a steel barb.

Pooled blood bursts forth in a brief cataract. Mixed with the scent of her blood is the odor of urine.

This is not death; it is indignity.

My nylon windbreaker is composed of my colors: gold and black. I take it off and cover the dead woman's face. Then I glare around the circle of onlookers. Most of them stare at the ground and mumble, then turn and leave.

I draw back the jacket for a moment and lightly kiss the dead woman's lips.

I love this town between festivals. Living among the stable population of two thousand refreshes me after months of engulfment in the cities of the coasts., I am pleased by the ambivalent socialness of friendly greetings on the street, but without anyone pushing me to respond further. Warm people who hold a fetish of privacy are an impossible paradox elsewhere. This town prides itself on paradox.

The rules do not always hold true in the public downtown, particularly during the festivals. The outsiders flood in at various times of the year for their chamber music and jazz festivals, art symposiums, video circus, and other, more esoteric gatherings.

Although the present festival will not begin until tomorrow at dawn, the town is crowded with both participants and spectators. Tonight people fill the bars downtown and spill out onto the sidewalks along both sides of Main. Though August is not yet ended, the cold crisps the night. The town is at nearly nine thousand feet, and chill is to be expected; but the plumes of breath billow more than one would expect. The stars are clear and icy tonight; I see clouds scudding up the valley from the west.

There is a shifting, vibrant energy in the crowds that runs like quicksilver. I can feel it. The moon tonight is new, so I can't ascribe anything to lunar influence. The magic must generate from the gestalt interaction of the flyers and the watchers. Or, more likely, from the ancient mountains that ring us on three sides.

The air seems most charged in the Club Troposphere, the street-front bar on the ground floor of the Ionic Hotel. I have a table in one of the Trope's raised bay display windows overlooking the sidewalk. The crowd flux continually alters, but at any given moment, at least a dozen others share the table with me. Some stand, some sit, and in the crowd din, body

language communicates at least as much as words. I'm stacking empties of imported beers in front of my glass. This early in the evening, my pyramid looks more Aztec than Egyptian.

I continue to taste blood; the thick, dark ale won't wash it away. Before I truly realize what I'm doing, I grasp the latest empty by the neck and slam it down on the hardwood. "God *damn*!" Amber glass sprays across the table and I raise the jagged edges of the neck to the level of my eyes.

"Mairin!" Across the table I see Lark look up from nuzzling Haley's throat. "Mairin, are you all right?" he says. Haley stares at me as well. Everyone at the table is staring at me.

"I dropped it," I say. I set the severed neck down beside my glass.

Lark gets up from Haley's lap and comes around the table to me. I stare from one to the other of the vertices of my present triangle. Lark is small, compact and dark, with the sense of spatial orientation and imagination and the steel muscles, all of which make him a better Dragon pilot than anyone else here. With the probable exception of me. Haley is tall and light, a woman of the winter with silky hair to her waist and eyes like ice chipped from inaccessible glaciers. But when she smiles, the ice burns.

"Are you okay?" Lark places his fingers lightly on the hand with which I smashed the bottle. I move the hand and pick up my glass. A barmaid hovers beside us, wiping shards into a paper towel.

I nod. "It was an accident."

Lark puts his face very close to mine. "The rookie who died today—you saw the whole thing, right?"

"I saw her get into the truck for the ride up to the point. She was very young. I didn't know her."

"She was good," Lark says. "I know people who flew with her in the midwest. Today she was very unlucky."

"Obviously."

"That's not what I meant." Lark smiles in the way I've learned to interpret during the long years of competition as all teeth and no mirth.

"After the medics took her body away from you practically at gun point, I went over her equipment with the officials. She committed a beginner's error, you know—dipped a wingtip when she went off. Clipped an outcropping."

"I saw," I say. "She recovered."

"We did X-rays. There was a flaw in the metal. That's why the one wing buckled."

"God." I feel sick, dizzy, as though I'm whirling around in that bright cobalt body-bag, waiting for the ground to smash out my life.

"Whoever," Lark says. "Just bad luck." He hesitates. "I keep thinking about all the times I've inspected my own equipment. You can only check so much."

Haley has come around the table too and stands close to Lark. "I wonder what it felt like."

"I know," I say. I look at Lark's face and realize he knows too. Haley is an artist and photographer who sticks close to her gallery here in town. She has never flown. She can never know.

I'm really not sure how many beers I've drunk tonight. It must be more than I think I've counted, because I do and say what is uncharacteristic of me. With Lark and Haley both standing there, I look into Haley's winter eyes and say, "I need to be with someone tonight."

"I—Mairin—" Haley almost stutters. She gentles her voice. "Lark asked me already..."

"Lark could un-ask you," I say. I know that's unfair, but I also know my need. Lark is staring studiously out the window, pretending to ignore us both.

Haley says, "Lark was there too. He needs—"

"I need." They both stare at me uncomfortably now without speaking. Individually I know how stubborn each can be. Three springs tauten. I want to reach out and be held, to thaw and exhaust myself with body warmth. I want to reach out with the shattered bottle-neck and rip both of

them until I bathe in steaming blood. Then it all goes out from me and I sink back in my chair. I am so goddamned suspicious of the word *need* and I have heard it too many times.

"I'm sorry," I say. "I'm behaving badly."

"Mairin—" both start to say. Lark touched my shoulder. Haley reached out.

I shove back my chair and get up unsteadily. My head pounds. Nausea wracks my belly and I am glad there is no competition for me tomorrow. "I'm going to my room. I don't feel..." I let the words trail off.

"Do you need help?"

"No, Haley. No, love. I can make it." I push past and leave them at the table. I hope I'm leaving my self-pity there too. The lobby of the Ionic is another zoo of milling humans. I make it to the lone elevator where luck has brought the cage to the first floor. As I enter the car, a bearded flyer-groupie in a yellow down jacket unwisely reaches in from the lobby and grabs my wrist.

"Lady, would you like a drink?" he says.

The spring, still taut, ratchets loose. Luckily for him my knee catches him only in the upper thigh and he flails backward into the lobby as spectators gape. The doors close and the elevator climbs noisily toward my floor. Two young men stand nervously in the opposite corner, just as far from me as four feet will allow.

I'll regret all this tomorrow.

I know the woman who comes to me that night.

I am she.

The cotton sheet slides coolly, rustling, as I restlessly change position. I've pushed the down comforter to my knees. It's too hot for that. The cold will come later, past midnight when the hotel lowers all the thermostats.

Finally I despair of sleeping, lie still, lie on my back with my hands beside me. I can see dimly in the light from the frosted glass transom, as well as the white glow from the hotel neon outside the single window. I hear the muffled sounds of celebration from the street below.

Then I see the woman standing silently at the foot of the bed. I know her. She is short—five-four without shoes. Her body is slender and muscular. The shadows shift as she moves around to the side of my bed. Darkness glides across her eyes, her neck, between her breasts, on her belly and below. Her breasts are small with dark, prominent nipples. Her muscles, when she moves, are not obtrusive but are clearly delineated.

She steps into the light from the street. There are no crowsfeet visible in chiaroscuro. Her face is delicately boned, heart-shaped with a chin that misses sharpness by only a degree. Her eyes are wide and as dark as her close-cut hair. In the semi-darkness I know I am seeing her as she was when she was twenty and as she will be when she is forty.

I slip the sheet aside as she silently lies in my bed. Slowly, delicately, I slide the fingers of one hand along the side of her face, down the jawline, across her lips. Her lips part slightly and one fingertip touches the firm, moist cushion of her tongue.

Then even more gently I cup her breasts, my palms feeling their warmth long before the skin touches the tips of each erect nipple.

It takes a thousand years.

My hands slide down her flanks and touch all that is moist and warm between her legs. I know what to seek and I find it. The warmth builds.

I think of Haley. I think of Lark. I blink him out. Haley leaves of her own accord and abandons me pleading. My pleading, her leaving.

My finger orbits and touches, touches and orbits, touches. The warmth builds and builds, is more than warmth, builds and heats, the heat— The heat coils and expands, ripples outward, ripples across my belly, down my thighs. For a moment, just a bare moment, something flickers like heat lightning on the horizon—

—but it is not sufficient. I am not warm enough.

Heat radiates and is lost, spent. I see Lark and Haley again in my mind and blink away the man. But Haley leaves too.

Only I am left.

I wish the woman would sleep, but I know her too well.

I wish I could sleep, but I know me so well.

Dragon Festival.

It is nearly dawn and the roar of dragons splits the chilly air. The tongues of propane burners lick the hearts of twenty great balloons. The ungainly shapes bulk in the near darkness and slowly come erect. The crews hold tight to nylon lines.

As the sun starts to rise above the peaks beyond the two waterfalls, I see that snow dusted the San Juans sometime past midnight. The mountains are topped with were-snow—a sifting that came in the night and will shortly vanish with morning sun. The real storms are yet to come with the autumn.

Mythic creatures rear, up in the dawn. These are nothing so simple as the spherical balloons of my childhood. Laboratory-bred synthetics have been sculpted and molded to suggest the shapes of legend. A great golden gargoyle hunches to the east. To the west, a hundred-foot tall gryphon strains at its handlers' lines. The roaring, rushing propane flames animate a sphinx, a satyr, a kraken with basket suspended from its drooping tentacles, a Cheshire cat and chimera of every combination. The giants bob and dip as they distend, but it is a perfect morning with no wind.

I find a perverse delight in not feeling as wretched as I anticipated last night. My mind is clear. My eyes do not ache. Though I was not able to cope with breakfast food, I did manage to drink tea. I realize I'm being caught up in the exhilaration of the first festival day. I know that within the hour I will be flowing with the wind, floating with the clouds. "How do you feel this morning?" A familiar voice. "Did you get any rest?" Another familiar voice. I turn to greet Haley and Lark. "I feel fine. I got some sleep." I determine to leave any qualifications behind. "I'll see you on the

ground," says Lark. Haley looks at me steadily for several seconds, a time that seems much longer. Finally she draws me close and says, "Good luck. Have a fine flight." Her lips are cool and they touch my cheek briefly.

Lark and she walk toward the balloon called *Cheshire*. I hear fragmented words from a portable public address system that tell me all flyers should be linking their craft to their respective balloons. I walk across the meadow to *Negwenya*. *Negwenya* is the Zulu word for dragon. *Negwenya* is a towering black and scarlet balloon owned by a man named Robert Simms. Robert's eight-times-removed grandparents were Zulu. Robert is a great believer in the mystique of dragons and sees an occult affinity between *Negwenya* and the Dragon V flyers he ferries up to the sky.

I walk between the serpentine legs of *Negwenya* and feel the sudden chill of entering shadow. The people holding *Negwenya's* lines, mostly local volunteers, greet me and I answer them back. From where he waits beside my Dragon V, Robert raises a broad hand in welcome. My gold and black glider looks as fragile on the wet grass as it did in the electric glow when I left to watch the coming dawn.

"You ready?" Robert's voice is permanently hoarse from a long-ago accident when a mooring line snapped and lashed around his throat.

"I'm ready." I check the tough lightweight lines that will allow my Dragon to dangle below *Negwenya* as the balloon takes us up to twelve thousand feet. The ends of the lines tuck into safety pressure catches both on the underside of *Negwenya's* gondola and on my craft's keel tube and wing braces. Either Robert or I can elect at any time to release the catches. Once that happens, *Negwenya* will go on about its own business and I will describe the great descending spiral that eventually brings me back to earth.

More orders blare from the bullhorn across the field. It doesn't matter that none of us can understand the words; we all know what happens next.

"Let's link up," says Robert.

I nod and climb into my harness under the Five as Robert and a helper hold the wings steady on the support stands. It isn't like getting ready to fly a 767; just a few metallic clicks and the appropriate straps are secured. I pull on my helmet and check the instrumentation: the

microprocessor-based unit in the liner records air speed, ground speed, and altitude. The figures appear on a narrow band along the inside of the transparent visor. There is an audible stall warning, but I rarely activate that; I'd rather gauge stability directly from the air flutter on the wing-fabric.

"Okay, just a few more minutes," says Robert.

I'm glad the Five is resting on the supports. The entire craft may only weigh sixty pounds, but that's half what I weigh. My flight suit feels sticky along the small of my back; I'm sweating. I hear the amplified words of the pageant director continue to fragment on the leading edge of the mountain.

"Time to do it," says Robert. He climbs up to the launch ladder and steps into the gondola. Then he looks back over the edge—I see the reflection in the bulge of my visor—and grins. "Good luck, lady." He displays an erect thumb. "Break a leg."

With a rush and a roar, the twenty lighter than air craft embark. The paradox is that with all the fury and commotion, the score of balloons rises so slowly. Our ascension is stately.

Excited as ever by the sight, I watch the images of ground things diminish. I see the takeoff field swarm with video people; the insect eyes of cameras glitter. From beyond the ropes, the sustained note of the crowd swells with the balloons' first rising.

Harpies, genies, furies all, we soar toward a morning clear but for high cirrus. I fill my lungs with chill clean air and feel the exuberance, the climatic anticipation of that moment when each of us cuts loose the tether from our respective balloon and glides into free flight.

Free is the word, free is the key. I know I'm smiling; and then I feel the broad, loose grin. My teeth ache with the cold, but it doesn't matter. I want to laugh madly and I restrain myself only because I know I can afford to waste none of the precious oxygen at this altitude. The weather's fine!

I raise a gloved hand to Lark as *Cheshire* slowly rises past *Negwenya*.

His brown and yellow wings bob slightly as he waves back. The grin on *Cheshire's* cat doesn't seem nearly so wide as mine.

The valley town is a parti-colored patchwork. I glance up and scan the line of red figures along my visor. I'm a thousand feet above the meadow. I look from the comfortable brick and frame of the old town to the newer, wooden, fake Victorian homes rising from the mountain's skirts. Now I'm level with the end of the trees and the beginning of bare rock. To the east I look beyond the old Pandora Mill and see sun catch the spray from Ingram Falls and Bridal Veil. The waterfalls have not yet been turned off for the winter.

Toward the top of the canyon, light cross winds buffet the balloons slightly as I expected they would. *Negwenya* rotates slowly and I concentrate on feeling no vertigo. We sweep past a sheer rock face to the waves and shouted greetings of a party of climbers strung like colored beads from their ropes. The balloon pilots yell back.

I can intellectually understand the attraction of technical climbing, but I was never able to appreciate it on a gut level. And I tried. Perhaps the only level on which it communicates to me is: *because it's there. Haley*. I wonder if I should desire Haley so intensely if she were more accessible. Even the anticipation of the coming long flight cannot erase the chill and heat of her from my mind.

"Mairin!"

I hear Robert's shout above the rushing-wind sound of the burner.

"Mairin, are you watching your gauge?"

I hadn't been. *Negwenya's* at twelve-seven and it won't be long before we're thirteen thousand feet above sea level. While I was thinking about sapphire eyes, like a rank amateur, the other flyers had been cutting loose from their balloons. Below me I see the looping, swarming flight of Dragons.

I glance at the readouts again. Robert has assured my wind-direction. I drop.

My Dragon V drops away from the gondola and *Negwenya's* roar grows faint; then is gone. The silence of my flight enfolds me. I lie prone in my

harness, nothing else between me and the valley but air.

I fly for this moment.

The microprocessor's electronic senses tell me hard information: I am two thousand, nine hundred and sixty-two feet above the valley floor. My air speed is twenty-two miles per hour, only slightly less than my ground speed. My Dragon V presently travels nearly twelve feet horizontally for every foot it drops. In a minute I will lose about two hundred feet. Without searching out the thermal currents, I'll reach the ground in about fifteen minutes.

I pay no attention to the readouts. For the moment, the silence and openness, the caress of air on my face, all stir a complex reaction in my mind and body. I feel the throbbing start, far inside.

The slight shift of my body affects the attitude of my flight. The Dragon responds and I sweep into a wide, shallow turn.

No women or men have given me this feeling so fully as has the sky. I spiral down above the land and desire this to last forever. Gravity is the enemy of my love. As well I remind myself that I am part of the pageant; that just as the balloons are now drifting eastward, engaged in their slow-motion behemoth race, so it's demanded of the flyers that all land at about the same time in a live simulation of wide-screen spectacle. The cameras whirl. The broadcasts fan out from microwave towers. The spectators watch.

But I want to make it last.

And I realize, first shocked, then amused, how many minutes it's been since I've held Haley's image in my mind.

I wheel the Dragon around in a descending spiral, as silent and graceful as any gull. Catching up with the other Dragons, I hear the mutter of wind rippling the fabric ever closer to the wing's trailing edge. I recognize the proximity of a stall and moderate slightly the angle of the warperons.

There are times when I have thought of gently and irrevocably slipping into the tightest of spirals and hurling myself blackly through the heart of the air. I cannot count the times I have skirted that final edge. Always I've refrained.

The air touches my cheekbones with the soft, tickling touch of Haley's cloudy hair.

There are times...

Death in triplicate stands by my elbow at the bar. Three tall shapes in black hooded robes have stepped to the brass rail. Skull faces, obviously sculpted with care, grin from cowed shadows. They say nothing. The trio reminds me of participants in a Mexican holy day parade.

Two deaths stare around the crowded Trope. The other looks at me. With my beer, I toast it back silently.

"Hey! You people want anything?" The barman tonight is one of the Trope's owners. With the Dragon Festival now started, all possible personnel are needed to service the crowds.

Three bony grins turn to smile at him. There are no words.

After a pause the owner says, "Listen, this is for paying customers. You want something?"

Three shrouded figures lean across the bar toward him. The owner draws back. "Drink," he says, "or get out." Dead silence.

He apparently decides he's outnumbered. "Shit," the owner mutters, and goes off to wait on newcomers at the end of the bar. I think I hear a giggle from the death figure farthest from me. The nearest turns again to face me. Again I raise a glass in toast.

The figure reaches, hand ivory with makeup, into a pocket beneath the robes and withdraws an object. Then it extends the hand toward me. I accept a small skull made of spun sugar, another relic of Mexican religious celebrations. I incline my head gravely and set the candy skull beside my glass.

The nearest figure turns back to its fellows. I hear a whispered consultation. Then all three leave the bar together. As they reach the door, the barman shouts, "Good goddamn riddance!" He walks past me on the way to the cash register and I hear him say in a lower voice, "Give me the

creeps."

"Friends of yours?"

I turn to face Haley and Lark. I hadn't seen them coming. "Friends of ours." I shrug.

"Spooky," says Haley.

"Striking masks," says Lark.

"Want a beer?"

"We're already set," says Lark. "We've got a table back behind the grove of rubber plants. Do you want to join us?"

I toss down the final swallow of beer. "Thanks, no. Not yet. I'm going to get some fresh air before I do any more drinking. You want to come along?"

Lark shakes his head. "We've got to do some drinking before we get some more fresh air."

"Then I'll see you both later. I need the air." I pick up the spun-sugar skull and gnaw on the jaw region as I push through the crowd.

Outside it's warmer than it was last night. There is cloud cover; I suspect the San Juans will be solidly snowcapped by morning. I zip the front of my flight jacket and stick my balled fists into the pockets. Turning right, I head along Main toward the landing meadow. I see the amber lights of trucks still bringing in and unloading the deflated forms of the racing balloons. I heard earlier that Robert Simms and *Negwenya* won. I decide that's a good omen.

"Girl? Hey, stop a moment, girl."

I turn and look toward the source of the voice. I'm in front of the Teller House, the town's lone real department store. I look into the display window and see the life-sized image of an elderly ragged woman staring back at me. It's an argee screen—the name comes from the initials of the people who started setting up these synchronous video arrangements back in the late 'seventies. One enormous complex of electronic art, the argee

screens are spotted in cities and towns around the globe. Each screen shows a live, life-sized, simultaneous transmission of a street scene somewhere else in the world. Sound and video equipment beam my voice and image back to the linked screen. A computer randomly changes the linkages.

Right now the old woman sees and hears me. I see and hear her. I have no idea where she really is. The scene behind her is dark and obviously urban. It could be any night-time city.

"I'm in Baltimore," she says. "Where are you?"

I tell her.

"Oh yeah," she says. "I heard about you people. Saw you on the news. Bunch of fools who jump off cliffs on kites."

I laugh. "Condors launch from cliffs."

"Birds aren't too smart."

"But they fly."

"Yeah." She inspects me seriously. "You one of them?"

"Do I fly?" I nod. "Not exactly on a kite, though."

Her voice is thirsty. "Tell me about it."

For some reason I cannot ignore the imperative in her voice. I tell her about flying. I describe my Dragon Five as the combination of a high-winged monoplane and a bat. I talk of tomorrow's competition. I paint with words the colors of the long, gliding dragon kite I will tow behind my Five. I tell her of the *manjha*, the razor-sharp cutting line with which I will attempt to sever the tow-line of my opponent's kite. And with which he or she will try to sever mine. But most of all, I describe the flying. I talk religiously of fighting maneuvers in the sky.

And when I pause for breath, she says, "Girl, God bless you." Her image flickers.

The argee screen re-links. I blink a moment at the light. I see a daylight scene under bright sun. In the background is something that looks vaguely

like the Taj Mahal. A man in a white linen suit looks out of the screen at me. He inspects me and stares at the colors of my jacket. Slowly he nods his head as though comprehending something. He says, "*Woh kata hai?*"

I smile, spread my hands helplessly, and walk on.

Woh kata hai. I believe that's an Indian kite fighter's challenge.

Dreaming.

It's called a *pench* and I love it more than either soccer or skiing. Each of us stands in a circle about three yards in diameter; the circles are approximately twenty feet apart. The officials have limed the circles on the grass as they would stripe the yardlines for a football game. The breeze is light this morning, but it may kick up. I have brought several different sizes of fighting kites. When I look around at my competition, I generally have to tilt my head back. I am eleven years old.

My gear litters the close-cropped grass around my feet: kites, extra lines, a spare spool. My little brother, eight, sits boredly reading a science fiction paperback just inside my circle. If I need it, he'll help with the launching.

I love Saturday mornings in general, but this particular one is the Michael Collins Annual Kite Fly. It's the second Saturday in September and it delights everyone except the high school football coach who wanted to use this field for a practice scrimmage. Luckily the principal has an autographed picture of the Apollo 11 crew and is an old kite fighter himself, so that was that.

The kite fighting contest isn't the only event today, but it's the only one that interests me. The *pench* should start in a few minutes, at nine, and will continue until noon. Since I've got some sort of reputation, I'm one of the flyers who gets to start. Anyone who wants can take a turn standing in the opponent circle. If he loses, someone else takes his place. And if I lose, I'm out. Then I get to stand in line, waiting to challenge the current champions. I don't plan to spend a lot of time waiting in line.

This is an average Indian summer morning. It's cool now, but I'm

guessing it's going to get very hot by midday. The nearest referee—Mr. Schindler, the junior high shop teacher—tells us through his bullhorn that each contestant should be ready. My first opponent steps into the next circle. I don't know his last name, but his first name is Ken and he's really sure of himself. I tell him I wish him luck. Ken snickers. He's in at least eighth grade.

"You want help launching?" says my little brother. "I can do the first one myself." I adjust the bridle on a middle-sized kite. The breeze is gentle but steady.

"Okay." His attention returns to his Robert Heinlein novel. Ken's kite looks fourteen inches by a foot—too small. He's over-estimating the wind velocity. Too bad. "Launch 'em," says the referee.

I lightly throw my gold-and-black fighter into the air and pump the cotton string with my right hand: pull in, let out, pull in, let out, until the diamond-shaped kite gains lift in the breeze and begins to climb. I sneak a glance at Ken. His fighter autumnleaves into the ground. I catch his eye and smile. He glares before picking up his kite to launch again.

My kite is solidly airborne. I continue the rhythm of launch; now the pumping motions are longer, smoother, slower. With one handle of the spool anchored at my feet, I stand at an angle to the nine-pound control line. String sings between thumb and forefinger of my left hand at shoulder level. I brake with right hand at right hip. My fighting kite soars. My mind goes with it and, for a moment, I look down at the field and see myself distantly below. I recognize me because of the colors of my jacket.

Ken has finally launched his kite, and is trying to gain altitude with brute force rather than subtlety. I pay out another hundred feet of line and feel the knot that signals I'm at the pre-agreed altitude. I practice wind-current turns with my kite and look bored. I know Ken's looking at me, but I studiously ignore him.

"Okay," says the referee. "You both got the altitude? Go to it."

The strategy is fairly simple. Each of us has a flying line of five hundred feet. Then there's one hundred feet of cutting line between that and the kite. The cutting line is *manjha*, ordinary four-stranded string coated with a mixture of egg, starch, and powdered glass. I mixed mine myself. The rules allow us to double-coat the line so that when it's dry, it can slice an

opponent's line either from above or below. The winner of the competition is the flyer who has cut loose the greatest number of opponents' kites.

Ken opens the battle ferociously and heavy-handedly, diving his fighter at cross-angles to my string. I dive mine to compensate and am slightly faster. Ken cancels the tactic. That's a mistake too. I see his kite lurch sluggishly for just a moment. I pay out line and let my string rise into his. My index finger detects the slight vibration as the lines touch. I pull in and my fighter rises, tugging the cutting line against Ken's. His kite, severed, spins down with the wind while he reels in loose string. He does not look happy as my next competitor steps up to replace him.

"Good fight," says my little brother, and I'm not sure whether he's being sarcastic to Ken or to me.

My new opponent is a girl in the seventh grade who has just taken up fighting. She has promise, but very little experience. Her kite doesn't fly long after reaching fighting altitude.

It keeps going like that. In the first hour, I destroy five opponents. Next hour, six more. I let the competition keep their defeated kites if they can find them. Where would I store them all in my room?

Each hour we're allowed fifteen minutes out of competition. I use my time to change lines on my kite. Every time I cut someone else's line, my string loses some of its abrasive. I also adjust the bridle angle because the breeze continues to pick up.

The third and final hour gives me some better competition, but no one all that challenging. Not until Lark steps into the circle. He's even smaller than I am, but he's really tough. He's my age. We've grown up in the same small town and gone to school together from the first grade. We both started flying kites about the same time. Lark is the only one whose fighting ability I respect.

He nods to me and smiles, but says nothing as he launches his fighter. Even my little brother is interested in this contest so he puts his paperback down for the while. "Mairin hasn't lost yet," he says to Lark.

"I'd hate to spoil her morning," Lark says, "but I'm feeling pretty good."

His kite soars on the late morning heat. Lark's fighter is brown with

bright yellow bird-wings inset. "Okay," says Mr. Schindler, the referee. "This is the last one. It's almost noon."

At first Lark fights conservatively, not actively countering my spectacular strategies. The trouble is that my kite is all color. I dive on him like a falcon, swoop up from beneath, twirl my fighter across his like the blade of a buzz saw. Nothing happens. I know that much of the abrasive has been scraped from my cutting line by the seven competitions of the past hour. But I'm sure that at least a few feet of cutting edge remain on the line. It's a matter of finding it.

Lark realizes my problem and bides his time.

"Hey," says Mr. Schindler. "I want to go to lunch."

Lark makes his move. His brown and yellow fighter crosses the angle of my own string, then drops. My index finger feels the slight vibration as his line touches mine. Lark starts rolling his kite sideways. I compensate by letting out more string and somehow neither line cuts. What does happen, though, each of us discovers simultaneously through fingertips. Our lines have become entangled. Lark's expression is grim.

"Don't worry," I call. I pay out more string as I simultaneously give the line a series of small tugs. Instead of rotating my kite so as to unwind our lines, I rotate to wrap them tighter. Then I pull.

I cut Lark's string; and capture his kite because the upper line is still entwined with mine; all at the same time.

"Mairin!" He sounds furious. My eyes are on the two fighters.

"What?"

His voice moderates as I begin to reel in the kites. "It was a good contest."

I'll keep his kite in my room. For now, I lower my gaze to him and say, "Yes, it was very good." Unaccountably I want to run across to his circle and hug him. I would like to kiss him.

Hug Lark? Kiss him? I sit upright suddenly, supported on my elbows, and stare confusedly at the curtained light. My room in the Ionic Hotel

takes on a dawn reality. I glance to the side. Beside me, a humped form snores beneath the comforter. It's not Lark; I know that.

Lark? I didn't grow up with him; we come from opposite sides of the continent. We did not match our kites in childhood. My disorientation causes me to touch my face gently with my fingers to see if I am still who I think I am.

I try to recapture something of the dream. There is an elusive truth I'm missing.

Skyfighters.

We spend our lives riding the thermals, those great columns of heated air that lend lift to our machines and spirits. The thermals rise because they are warmer than the surrounding air. We look for the clues and seek them out, using them as elevators to the sky.

The best thermals generate in this valley from mid to late afternoon. Since there are two competitors remaining in the Dragon Festival contests, that time has been reserved for them. The sun has begun its descent into the open western end of the valley and the colors are, as always, spectacular. Crimson tongues lick through the cumulus.

Lark is one competitor; I am the other. All but we have seen our towed dragon kites spin down the long drop into mountainside, forest, or town, where the children vie to find the many-colored dragons and rip them to shreds.

Our duel will climax the festival.

Negwenya and *Cheshire* are waiting to ferry us both to a minimal fighting altitude. Then we will ride the thermals. Today Haley walks with me across the staging meadow. Her hand is in mine.

"You do talk in your sleep, you know," Haley says. "Do you know that?" Without an answer, she continues, "Some of the time the words are clear. Sometimes you simply make sounds and your body moves. You're a restless sleeper. I sleep like a lizard on a hot rock." She laughs. "Did you notice?"

I nod.

Her expression turns serious. "I know last night was important to you—at least it was before last night." Her smile is indecipherable. "Now isn't the time to ask you things, I suppose." She hesitates, and her grip tightens in mine. "People don't work well as goals for you. That's my game." Now I see sadness in her face. "You love the sky more."

We have reached *Negwenya*. Robert Simms waits with his assistants by my Dragon V. Haley enfolds me in her arms and kisses me a long time on the lips. "Fly well," she whispers, then turns and walks across the field toward *Cheshire*.

I realize I'm crying, and I'm not sure yet why.

"Time to link up," says Robert, and his harsh, rope-scarred voice sounds to me softer than usual. I fasten myself into the harness of the Dragon V. I check to make sure the bridle of my fighting kite is securely fastened to the winch-post projecting downward from the Five's keel tube, just behind the point to which my legs extend. The fighting kite is a long, serpentine dragon of mylar, painted in my colors. It has the oval face and trailing, snake-like body characteristic of dragon kites. The only differences are the additional lifting surfaces and stabilizing fins.

The flight is ready to begin. I look across to *Cheshire*. Lark gives me a thumbs-up sign and Haley waves. At *Negwenya*, Robert offers me a brilliant smile and his ritual. "Break a leg, lady." And we launch.

At twelve thousand feet, *Negwenya* floats almost directly above the immense tailings pond of the moribund Pandora Mine. The bright white tailings heap looks like some malignant thing beached between creek and trees. I think of kids singing their technological jingles when the wind rises and sifts white dust from the tailings down across the town: "Hexa, hexa, hexavalent chromium!"

I notice that the aspen on the steep sides of the valley are starting to turn prematurely. Great slashes of golden yellow have suddenly appeared within twenty-four hours. No aspen is an island. The root systems of groves are interconnected. When the chlorophyll breaks down in one tree's

leaves in the autumn, so goes its extended family.

I had seen broken cumulus above the valley when I linked up to *Negwenya*. Scattered puffy formations are the giveaway signs of thermals, since condensation forms atop the pillars of warm air. The problem is that clouds move with the wind and usually only indicate where the thermals *were*. Extrapolation and a few good guesses should gain my ride up.

At twelve-five, I release the pressure catches and the Five drops away from *Negwenya*. I crane my neck and see that Lark has also dropped. In terms of radiated heat, both of us are more likely to find thermals over the tailings pond or the rooftops of town than above the darker fields or forest. Lark seems to be making for the pond. I stretch my body, feel the muscles loosen, and wheel my Dragon toward the center of town.

The scarlet sunset momentarily dazzles my eyes. I guessed correctly. I feel the left wing rise slightly indicating I am skirting a thermal. I bring the nose down and turn into it; then feel the mild confirming bump that I am all the way in. Now what I have to do is stay inside the current in a gentle ascending spiral until I've reached the prearranged altitude. In this case, that is fifteen thousand feet. Neither Lark nor I want to try for altitude records today, though kite pilots here have gone above eighteen thousand without oxygen.

Up, up, and the readout on my visor lists off the numbers. As I rise in the thermal column, I touch the button on my control bar that unreels the line tethering my fighter. The black and gold dragon shape drops below and behind my Five. The lift ratio of the kite with its fins is excellent, so it takes only a few moments before it is gliding behind the Dragon. I pay out the entire hundred feet of line. Dragon follows Dragon like an offspring trailing the parent.

I am allowed fifty feet, half the tether, to be cutting line. But where the abrasive lengths are placed, and indeed, *what* lengths are made abrasive, are up to me. Equipment officials carefully checked before launch to ensure that no more than fifty percent of the dragon's two-line is a cutting surface. Like shagreen, the surface cuts only in one direction.

As I swing back across the town, I see that Lark is ascending above the tailings pond. I see his Dragon followed by the brown and yellow fledgling that is his fighter.

At fifteen thousand feet, the air is thin and painfully crisp. The sunlight feels like it's striking my eyes with sharp edges until I polarize my visor. Now that it's time to leave the thermal, I exit on the upwind side to minimize altitude loss in the cooler surrounding air.

Lark and I stalk each other like soaring birds. These Dragons are not the Indian fighting kites of childhood. There are no sudden moves—or rarely. Maneuvers tend to be graceful and conservative, to minimize loss of altitude.

We sweep by each other in a wide pass and I estimate I'm about one hundred feet higher than Lark. From one point of view, we might seem to be tracing arabesques across the sky. From a more realistic referent, we circle each other like hungry, cautious predators.

Lark loops back in a figure-eight and sails along still below, but parallel to me. I assume he is offering bait and try to guess how many moves ahead he's thinking. My craft and I are slightly heavier than he and his; my sink rate is higher and so I'm gradually descending to his altitude. I'm in a position to wing over and pounce, but that's the expectable thing. Lark doesn't expect me to do the expected; so I do it.

I hit the warperons hard; the ends of my wings deform and peel me into a steep, descending bank. I'm losing vertical advantage fast, but my Dragon is cutting down hard behind Lark's tail. It should have been an easy victory except that Lark reacts as though anticipating me—and I have the bemused thought that he probably was. The brown and yellow Dragon matches me move for move. If he's not duplicating the exact angle of bank and degree of dive, I can't tell the difference.

Damn it! Frustration moderates my caution as I slam the Dragon into a reverse-angle bank. Stabilized fabric crackles like firecrackers; the aluminum skeleton groans.

Lark predicted that one too. I know the long lenses on the ground are taking all this in. I hope the viewers are enjoying it.

The hell with this. I tighten my downward spiral, knowing that sooner or later I'll suck him out of the tactic. Either that or we'll hit the ground together.

Anyone else would have pulled out of this falling moth spiral in some

sort of sane maneuver that should have allowed me to use the slim remaining margin of altitude and cross their fighter's tether with my cutting line. At times I must remind myself that Lark is no saner than I. One moment I'm aware that I'm still sinking closer to Lark and in a relatively short time am going to be right on top of him. The next moment Lark reverses the pitch of his spiral in an aching, crushing maneuver that neither rips off his wings nor puts him into a stall. I see brown fabric rush past my right eye, so close that I recoil slightly. *Jesus!* One track of my mind wonders how close his cutting line came to severing my wing—or my head.

I don't know what he's planning, but I won't equal his suicide maneuver. As I level off less precipitously, I see Lark to my right, apparently fleeing. I look beyond his Dragon and know this is not an abdication of the field. Lark is making for what appears to be a great funnel of birds soaring upward. They're in a thermal.

Rather than seek out my own thermal, I pursue Lark, hoping to catch him before he reaches the elevator. The epinephrine surge from Lark's spectacular maneuver starts to abate, leaving tingling in my chest and hands. I will the Dragon to fly faster; other than that I can do nothing but let the craft sail serenely along. I enjoy the silence. I remember the network coverage of a previous Dragon tourney in which, as a novelty, audio technicians had dubbed in the wasp-buzz sounds of old, piston-engined fighter planes. It was amusing at first, but ultimately offensive.

I am close to Lark, but not close enough as he enters the thermal and begins his ascent. I glance at my altimeter readout: ten-seven. That means we were about a thousand feet above the town when Lark pulled out of the spiral. I trust all the groundlings were suitably thrilled. At a thousand feet, people truly *do* look like ants.

The gentle bump of entering the warmer air rocks the Dragon's nose and I start to follow Lark vertically. As I go into the ascending bank, I sneak a look behind and see that my black and gold fighter is still trailing. Good. It hasn't occurred to me in these past minutes to check. It's an article of faith that I won't lose the dragon kite through mechanical accident or chance.

Again because he's lighter, Lark rises faster in the thermal than I. I resign myself fatalistically to the ride up and start to think like a tourist. I

never, *never* think like a tourist. But now I look at the aspen, or I stare down at the checkerboard town, or I think about the act of flight rather than feeling it. Or something.

Something!

I look up and stare and react—try to do all those things at once. Lark hasn't done as I anticipated. He has not waited until achieving the fighting altitude. No need—no rule that says he must. Instead he swoops upon me like a hawk at prey.

His Dragon grows in my vision. I watch. I know I must choose a maneuver, but something else bids me wait. By now I should be reacting unconsciously. If my conscious is at work, it's now too late. There are several possible defensive maneuvers. So far today, Lark has correctly anticipated my every movement.

—large, so large. Brown and—

I must choose, I must—I do nothing.

That is my choice.

Lark does not anticipate it. Our vectors merge. His Dragon slams into mine with a force I could probably calculate, except—except I cannot think. I don't know if I'm hurt or if I'm in shock. I feel nothing. I simply know a buffeting like a great wind has seized us. I realize we are flying a ragged craft composited of bits and pieces of our two Dragons: snapped, flailing wires, twisted tubing, rent fabric. Lark hangs in his harness only a few feet from me, but he doesn't look up.

My vision skips like the frames in a badly spliced film. I see the golden aspen and the town spread out in the valley below us. I see Lark start to raise his head. Blood covers one side of his face. Droplets fly backward from his head like a fan.

I see the truth in that scarlet spray.

It is a long moment suspended in time.

Then it falls.

We fall—as bits of shattered Dragon spin away from us like colored confetti. I try to reach out toward Lark, but I can move only one arm. He stares back at me and I think he's alive. The sky, I try to tell him. At least we're in the sky. There could have been so many other ways. But the sky—those who fly there are more important than any others.

Wind sucks the breath from my lungs. Lark, I try to say. Friend. I was wrong. I think Haley knows. Lovers. I should have—

I see green fields below.

Lark, it should have been us. We know the sky—

And the ground rises up like a fist.