

THE COMING WORLD

GINO DIZON

1

But Grandma hadn't packed up yet.

This thought troubled Jet. He biked down Dahlia St. The wind blew in his face. He shook his head, to get rid of the thought. Sometimes that worked, this time it didn't. The thought stayed in his head. And that feeling again, somewhere in his insides, the gnawing of a terrible mouse. He didn't like that feeling. It wasn't a brave feeling.

He turned right to Sunflower Drive and pedaled as fast as he could.

Paradiseville was quiet. As quiet as the village in the story where the witch turned all the people into stone. The streets were empty; the houses, too. Doors shut; windows curtained. No one out on the porches; no children in the park. Sab wasn't in the swing, which she liked best. And Robbie wasn't whooshing in his rollerblades, drawing circles round Sab. Sometimes Robbie gave the swing a push, and that sent Sab shooting so high up in the air. But she didn't scream, just laughed. And when she got back to the ground, she said it was like flying. Your turn, she said. But Jet just shook his head. And Sab called him names, like *chicken*, which made Robbie laugh.

But Grandma said it was alright to be scared at your age. Besides, chickens weren't all that bad. She used to keep chickens when

she still lived in her farm. They laid eggs, which were warm and round, when you cupped them in your hand. But the chicken was just as bad as the mouse, except that no one but him knew about the mouse. Robbie was a strong boy, and Sab a brave girl, and he didn't always like playing with them.

Now they weren't in the park. And he felt alone in the world. And riding his bike at top speed like this, free, adventurous.

He knew most of the neighbors had already gone. They packed their stuff and drove off in their vans, and left Paradiseville, left Angeles City. It was the *evacuation*. After the meeting at the clubhouse, no one bothered to say goodbye anymore. No one knew when anyone was coming back. Daddy had closed down his construction company. They, too, were evacuating.

Very soon, Daddy said. So be ready.

So Jet packed all his things up. And didn't even ask for anyone's help. He could do things on his own now. It was just like going on a trip. And he was ready. A bright bird beat its wings in his chest. He barged into Grandma's room. But the hairbrush, her dress, her medicine bottle—all her things were still in their proper places. Grandma, you haven't packed up yet. Grandma simply shrugged. I have very few things. Besides, there's still work to do.

And Grandma took her garden things in her pail, and walked down the hall, and when you watched her walking like that, you saw how old she really was now, all of her hair white, and her funny walk like that of a duck, like she couldn't balance herself on the ground anymore. Grandma walked down the hall, and through the lanai, and somewhere in the garden disappeared.

Isn't Grandma coming, Da? Daddy was in the garage, moving his tools to the topmost shelves. Of course, what do you think, we'll leave her here all alone? Daddy sounded annoyed. Didn't

even look at him. Then more gently, Go play somewhere else.

So Jet gave in to the lure of empty streets. And stood on his speeding bike. A lone bird had begun to hover above him. It emerged from somewhere behind the treetops, winged its way up and down the leafscape, and then aimed for the sky, in a steady glide. It was a big white bird. He had never seen a bird like that before. Carefully balanced on his bike, he stretched out his arms. But soon this stunt lost its novelty, too.

Riding a bike was easy. Just the past summer he learned how. And how fast he did. First, in small wobbly circles in front of the house. Grandma was trimming the roses nearby. Then Grandma stood up. Why don't you bike all the way down there? She was pointing to the end of the street. You can do it, go ahead. And he did. He got as far as the end of the street. He was out of breath. He was shaking. When he looked back, Grandma was leaning against the acacia tree, watching him with squinted eyes.

Summer ended. June came. No classes were announced. Daddy *suspended work* at the new shopping mall he was building with his American partners. It was the *impending calamity*. In one of the mountains west of the city, Daddy pointed out on the map, there lived a giant turtle, fire-hearted, and dragon-clawed. It had now woken up. And soon would burn the entire city into a desert of ash.

Mount Pinatubo, Mama said. We're all going to be buried. Black ash and hot mud.

But Daddy said not to mind her. She was just upset. The Americans had also closed down Clark Airbase, even though they said there was no need to panic, they were watching the situation closely. Mama was manager at the PX shop at the base, where she sold imported things, which were also important things. Now she just stayed at home, turning the whole house upside down, with all the maids behind her: The jars, the

carpet. That one, too. Bring them all upstairs. No, not that way!
Carefully—

Yes, yes, of course, she's coming. Don't get in the way now.

Jet slowed down. He had reached the end of the village. There were barely any houses here now, mostly just vacant lots, overgrown with grass, and damp with leaf-rot. Also, trees, huge and unkempt; the gnarl of their roots rising from the earth, and sending cracks across the pavement. At the very end of this street rose the tower, and on top of the tower sat the tank. Lacking any destination of his own, Jet had trailed the bird instead. It had now changed the direction of its flight, more aimless, it seemed, just wind-bound, but in circles, wheeling idly and widely above the tank.

Jet stood at the foot of the tower, gauging its height. It rose high up into the sky, higher than anything he had ever climbed, past the top of the village wall that was barbed with wires. *The other side!* He was going to see the other side of the wall. He shook the steel ladder that was attached to the leg of the tower. It didn't budge. This was easy. He began the climb. His steps light and nimble, monkey-like, and he didn't even run out of breath.

Just a few years ago, before Daddy brought Grandma to live with them, this would have been impossible. There were so many things he wasn't allowed to do then. He was a bad boy. Screamed a lot. Kicked at things, even people. Just imagine, Mama would throw her hands in the air, three yaya's in three months! And not one could put up with him.

Then Grandma came. She barely spoke, or just to the maids. But she took care of the garden, and the flowers bloomed. She let him play in the mud and make wet slapping sounds with it. In the garden, they talked a lot.

Once Grandma cut up Mama's throwaway curtains, and made him pajamas and herself a pretty dress. When he and Grandma wore their matching pajamas and dress, Mama was so shocked she couldn't speak. Later she had a talk with Grandma in the kitchen, where he couldn't hear them.

But he behaved in school, which made Mama glad. He finished the food on his plate. He no longer threatened to burn Mama's furniture. Nor break her precious jar collection.

See, you could be a very dependable boy when you like it, Grandma said. And when she said it like that, as she brushed your hair, it no longer sounded like something grownups just said to make you stay put and be nice. It sounded true—it *was* true.

So he stayed still in between Grandma's knees. He liked Grandma's particular smell, which was like the smell of warm feathers, and also, soil and wind. He liked the touch of her skin, which was as smooth as the inside of a tree when peeled of its bark. A very reassuring tree. He told no one all this. Not even Grandma.

Was Daddy a dependable boy, too?

Not as much as you.

He reached the top. He stood on the ledge, hugging the tank with what short span his arms could make. Never before had he felt the wind beating against his back like this, blowing round his legs, filling the inside of his shorts. He stood still. Catching his breath. Eyes still closed. He was preparing for the moment. When suddenly—*Hoy!* It was a voice, a small voice, a boy's, but from far away.

Jet peered beneath him. But no boy stood at the other end of the tower in the world below. How tall he was, as tall as the

sky. Slowly, carefully, he turned. And held his breath. A flock of sudden birds, smaller and swifter, burst from one treetop, scattered in the wind, and darted into other, separate canopies. The conference was over. It was quiet now. All the roofs and treetops of Paradiseville lay before him in neat rows of streets. This was better than Daddy's map. Have Robbie and Sab ever done something like this? Have they seen the bird's eye view?

Then, *H-o-o-o-y!* It was the voice again, longer and louder than any wind. And it was coming from beyond the wall.

First he saw the river. And instantly recognized it. It was the river that did not flow, the river that Daddy owned, because Daddy had river-rights. Got them from the Mayor himself. Jet had never seen the river from this side. Masses of grass swept along its banks and slopes, and spilled down to the riverbed, where they broke into scattered tufts round cuts of rocks. Across the river, on the other bank, there he was, the boy who cried *hoy*, his legs apart, calling out to him through cupped hands.

Distance had made the other boy so small. Jet could hold him in between his forefinger and thumb. Which he did. And when he did, the riverbank boy laughed. And it was an unabashed laugh streaked only by phlegm. I know that one! the riverbank boy shouted and promptly did the same trick with his fingers. So that now it was Jet's turn to laugh, to acknowledge their mutual perspectives.

Then, the riverbank boy shouted: We're evacuating!

Only then did Jet notice the neighborhood that spread rough-and-tumble behind the riverbank boy. An un-walled neighborhood, of scrap and cardboard houses, now empty beneath dusty trees. You're evacuating, too? The riverbank boy again. But Jet was hesitating. But friendliness demanded response. He cupped his hands, after the other boy's manner. But before he could manage a shout, or invent some sound,

already the riverbank boy was making another gesture with his arm. He angled his arm to an *L*, to indicate they were hitching a ride. He did this twice, then pointed to the west, to the bridge—the riverbank boy was pointing to the bridge.

At the brink of the river, where the highway ended, began the steel-and-concrete bridge that spanned the length of the river-gap. Jet knew this bridge. It was the Abacan Bridge, which they crossed every day, when Manong drove him to school and Grandma sat beside him with his schoolbag and lunch box. People were gathering there now, lugging their bags and children and kitchen things. Slow and heavy vehicles were moving quietly along the bridge, jeeps, cars, and those big military vehicles the Americans kept at the base, where he saw them once, when Mama took him there.

They were now all moving quietly, and slowly too, though there was no traffic. No need to panic, the Americans said. But now they themselves were leaving the city. Who was going to watch the situation now? Just then something else caught Jet's attention. Past the bridge, further down the river path, stood Daddy's pet-bulldozer. But it was no longer feeding on the river stones. It looked so small from the tower, alone and stranded in the river-path, which went on winding its way to the west, where it ended somewhere at the foot of the mountains.

In the distance, the mountains were a mere jaggedness against the sky. But from one of the mountaintops, the one in the middle, the highest peak, issued the dark breath that across the sky mushroomed into an enormous cloud-swell. It had banished the sun. It had divided the sky. A clear sunless sky, on his side of the city. But to the west, only a black bilious cloud-world.

We're going now, the riverbank boy was shouting. He was gesticulating with excitement. An older woman near the bridge was calling out to him to come and hurry now. And the riverbank boy ran then. He ran beside the river, and waved

back at Jet, We don't wanna be buried alive! Bye now! And Jet wanted to shout goodbye too. But the voice was thin and dry in his throat. But he managed to wave his arm. But the riverbank boy had already gone. And soon the people on the bridge too. And the vehicles too. Only silence.

How long Jet stood there, watching the riverbank, the bridge, the empty city, and the lone bird in the sky, white and naked against the looming dark to the west, he would not remember afterward. Only the lightness in his legs, their trembling in the wind, and a fearing in the sour pits of his stomach, that drained the strength in him, but that propelled him to make his way back to the ladder, and climb down. Jet climbed down, his heart pounding in his face. And he climbed down. And it was really down. He had never gone down such depths. Somewhere in his descent, the nimble monkey failed him. He missed a step, and the wind did not catch his flight.

Part-human, part-bicycle, the boy retraced his path home beneath slashes of branches, through shadows of leaves. He pedaled only slowly.

A dull ache in his limbs grew sharp at every abrupt movement. How long he had slept at the foot of the tower, he did not know. Only that he awoke to the sudden flapping of wings somewhere beside him. But when he opened his eyes, there was no bird, only a sudden night, the dark, possibly of a gathering storm. Also, he was hungry.

Perhaps it was this sensation, which he had always associated with his grandmother, that made him think of her again. He longed to be in bed, warm and soft in his sheets, and Grandma in her rocking chair by the bed, telling him bedtime stories about the farm again, where she lived before coming to Angeles City. The story of the monkey that ran away; of Grandma's only sister who rode a winnowing basket and flew far away, never to return again. Of the contest between the turtle and the king

heron down by the river. Of Grandpa who was the Capitan, in the fields astride his buffalo, and who with a mere hand's gesture, directed the flight of birds. He must tell Grandma to pack her things now.

When he got home, the house was dark and quiet, as though empty. Only the tiny light of a candle in the kitchen. Around it sat Grandma, Daddy, and Mama. They stopped whispering as soon as he entered. They just sat there watching him, as though expecting him. Their faces were long in the scant light, and Mama's eyes red, as though she had just cried.

Jet just stood at the entrance, quiet, and suspicious, because he was not yet sure what his participation in all this might be. Then, when he could no longer bear it: What's wrong? And he caught himself using that sharp voice again, accompanied by something knotted and tight in his chest, that voice he used only when he felt like kicking at something.

No electricity, Grandma said, in her squawky voice. In the tiny light, her hair and skin had grown so white, and her mouth distorted into what must have been a smile. But the boy refused to return the smile. And instead opted for the direct attack: Pack up your things now! It was a scream, barely suppressed, in the throat. Pack up your things! *Now!*

Watch your mouth, Daddy said, calm but hard. You're not too big for my belt yet. Mama hushed Daddy and put a hand on his arm. While Grandma just sat there, smiling at no one in particular, with squinted eyes. Or maybe they were just tired. Then Daddy changed his voice, which meant a change of strategy. We leave tomorrow, he began to say. But not everyone is leaving, he continued, just looking at the candle now. Some of the neighbors, they have second floors anyway, and—

I'm staying, Grandma interrupted, unruffled.

The boy kicked at the empty air, or almost. Only the ache in his leg aborted the kick. *Liar!* The cry sounded loud in the dark. *Liar!* The flame flickered in the dark. Shadows flailed across the walls.

That night the grandmother took the boy once more into the garden, for one last time. The grandmother, her gait wobbly, her back hunched, as though burdened by an invisible heaviness, her shadow growing smaller and rounder at every step. In the dim, the boy could have been clinging to the grandmother, or else the grandmother was leaning on the boy.

They went out of the dark of the house, and into the moonlit garden. For whatever the dark had promised had not yet come. Tonight the sky was clear, and even the stars were conspiring in the deception.

The garden was a swamp of grass, heavy with leaf-breath. Ferns spilled from pots, and vines snaked round latticed frames. Heliconias sagged tumescent from stems, and bromeliad-mouths gaped open. Orchids glinted with the cuts of their petal-flesh. In this garden of thick growth and bird-silence, the grandmother drew the boy to her side. And spoke to him in that faraway voice again. That voice the boy knew the grandmother used only when on the brink of another silence, which is sometimes also another story.

2

They called the place Heron Farm.

The people who lived in the place called it so, though it had no name, as vast stretches of open land had none. Often, here, the herons came, as they did upon the plains. They came in flocks, and with the wind that blustered and unpacked masses of grass, ransacking whatever lay exposed in its path. But for the young

rice grain, which on its stalk was steadfast, as the gods had promised after the first hunger.

And the people were glad. For the land itself seemed permanent. And the couple who owned it were their own.

The land had belonged to the couple's parents, and before that, to their parents' parents, going back to the original tree that across the village had spread intricate branches and bore manifold fruits, its roots prosperous, and gnarled deep into the earth, and hard. The Capitan was sturdy, his back unbroken by defeat, unflinching in every possible sun and rain. He had a way of tilling the land so it did not choke. A way of digging canals so they rivered dark waters in intricate proportions.

But most of all, his wife—that spare beauty with a magnanimous will. She knew the forty-seven names of the grain, through all the resolute stages of its life, from stalk to granary to pot. She showed you how to thresh the harvest so it harnessed only the good wind. And called you by your name, because she knew all of your names, from your newborn to your oldest forebear who could no longer stand her own sleep.

Afternoons, she gathered her winnowing circle of women, and beneath trees, amid leaf-burn and cacao smoke, listened to their gossip and banter, their private joys and aches. And she listened, too, to the litany of the newcomers, all itinerant people of the land, from coasts, valleys, the hills, and even as far as the scorch of the north. They came fleeing whatever it was, in search of a more hospitable home here in the Central Plains.

There's this hut by the dwarf acacia there, the Capitan's wife merely said to these newcomers then, and asked no more questions. Old and abandoned, but useful. You'll need it for the rain. And as sure as its name, and thundered by its longing, the rain did come.

They called her Imá, which was their name for both mother and grandmother in the dominant idiom of the land. When the rains ceased, she held out a hand, and the birds came.

The bringer of the grains

Sings for the doves

So they in flocks may approach

But before the king heron's reproach

She stands empty-handed

And is silent.

Once more the people took to singing this song, and what it meant, or did they still believe it, it no longer mattered. For just beyond their fences of bamboo, there they were, the herons, rising and falling, rising and falling, among the proof of the ripe, wind-hewn and sun-bloated. Which later in their hands, how brash, how full, the promise of the grain. And summer broke into rain, and rain abated into cold wind, and wind dispersed into hot dust, and still there were platefuls of plenty on the table, and more on the shelves.

They took their fruits for granted, whose source-trees crowded out each other, beyond their allotment of land. It was the final proof of the wonder of the land. For when summer broke into rain, all the women who partook of the fruits bore an entire new generation. And when rain abated into cold wind, the pigs, buffalos, and fowls that were fed with pulp or rind increased their young. And when the wind dispersed into hot dust, still the trees bore plenty, impervious to the law of the seasons.

Only an anxiety gnawed at Imá, and because they had become devoted to this woman with the fierce tug of blood, it gnawed also at them. In her late age, Imá had a son, an only child, who contrary to all expectations had no fondness for the land.

Where there was smoke, there the boy was. He could not keep his hands empty. But had to uproot whatever it was that was sticking out of the earth, a pestering weed, an unsuspecting flower, or a trembling vine, and set it on fire. And once, a poor bird, plucked from the breeze, and which could have undergone nameless tortures in the boy's playful hands, had only the boy escaped the watch of the Apu, who attended his birth, the oldest woman inhabitant of the village, and therefore its midwife.

The boy took no heed of his elders' words, but ran straight to them when he got himself into trouble, especially to his three godmothers, who smothered him with constant attention, and who at one time would have fed him of their own milk, had only their breasts been given a moment of respite.

But the neighbors had waited so long for this boy that now they could not but indulge him. So they let him lead his band of boys racing across the fields, disturbing the peaceful population of herons. The Capitan's love was invisible, and had the boy not been afraid of things he could not see, he could have touched it. But he did not.

The Apu, for her part, kept her constant watch, it was the burden of her old age, but the boy did not trust her, for he suspected gnarled and involved forms, like the root. Imá herself fumbled with the intricacies of late motherhood, which she resolved with the simplest method: yes, and always yes.

Once the boy was making a commotion out of the grain husks, scattering them in the air, so they fell around him in a shower. Stop that now or your father will cane you, yelled Imá. But the yell fell on deaf ears.

But the Apu interceded. Keep going on at that, she said in a voice that glinted, possibly with metal, and your skin will grow husks, and you'll turn into that monkey that ran away. The boy froze on the spot, wary. But he did run away.

He went on a vacation with an aunt, a sister of Imá, who lived there, way beyond, in the city. He decided to stay there just a little bit longer. And then later, to stay some more, to pursue his studies, and then finally, to try his luck there. It was an endless delay of homecoming that everyone soon came to believe was in reality the perpetual extension of a vacation interrupted only by visits as brief as the night. And in which, the word went around, the boy asked for some more money and bought a little more time.

So the couple just sold another patch of land, for what was a patch anyway, when their only child was getting ahead in the world? But summer came of age, and the Capitan's face grew pale, his back weak and round, as though growing a hump, and still he sweated out his bitterness in the fields. And the rain squandered itself into cold wind, and Imá kept winnowing with her circle, quiet as usual, but the sorrow always there, heavy on the eyelid sometimes. And the wind died down into hot dust, and everyone finally came to accept that this boy would never belong to them. Never did belong to them or their land.

Perhaps, it was just as well, the Apu was heard to say, something vague about the land that had always given but had never taken.

Soon the time came when the Capitan finally succumbed to the burden of his back. He lay in bed, never to rise again. The sons of the village, educated and now men, were full of ideas about the land, all of them unproductive. Then, for some unfathomable reason, in town, the value of the grain diminished, and trade grew slow.

Meantime Imá's boy, the word went around, had now established himself in the city, where he redirected the flow of rivers and razed down the path of trees. The boy, who was now a city man, paid the farm a visit. He went straight into the sickroom, and no one knew what transpired between father and son, but when the son came out, the father was in a violent fit, shouting in a dying whisper Imá's name. A few days later he died.

It's okay, Ma, the son said. It was his time. Imá's hand, rough and callused, almost swung to a slap. Now the boy's all grown up and settled, he hurries them into death, was the elder's opinion. But the son's face was beautiful, unmarred by farm living. You saw that even in the dusk. This boy never had to stay under the sun. So Imá held her hand, also her tongue. Perhaps her way of saying, thanks to this farm, he had that pretty face.

Imá was a widow now, but she was stubborn, like the earth she tilled. She rallied, maneuvered all farmhands, herself included, to force the land its yield. But summer grew into a long drought, and harvest dwindled. The rains came, and did not stop, but blurred the edges of things, and made old people grow small beside their candles, and the land itself acquired a habit of flood. And the rains ceased and gave birth to a stillborn wind. The foreman gesticulated, but had no explanation. It was as if the land simply said, No, I don't want to, and when you touched the earth, you felt the knuckles of a gripped fist.

That was when Imá was seen standing on an eroded bank of the canal, in the middle of the fields, or what was left of the fields. The three godmothers said she was persuading the birds, for the plenty to return. The Apu disagreed. Imá's face was in the sun. Her eyes were shut.

Let's sell the land, the son returned.

These were the very words the Apu and the three godmothers heard. And which they repeated like a penance for as many

times as they could to whoever had not heard them yet. And in its repetition, the idea began to sound plain and simple, even blameless. The land was a sunk cost. Imá's son, the city man, had foreigner friends, Americans. They were willing to invest. Something, a golf course, somebody said, and nobody was sure what it meant. But no one was surprised when the day finally came, and Imá signed some papers, no questions asked. Just marked her thumb with ink, and pressed it above what was supposed to be her name.

From now on, you will live with me, the son said, in the tone of a boast.

But for the Apu and the three godmothers, who had insisted on accompanying Imá down to the last minute of her shame, *from now on* made no sense. Imá had just sold the land—their land. Had packed an entire life into two boxes.

Then later, as the son was ushering the mother into the car, It's about time you moved to the city, matter-of-factly. As if that were the most natural thing to do, close to one's death.

From now on was a deception, they were convinced. And so without speaking at all, the Apu and the godmothers converged upon the curve of the same thought. They wanted to rush to Imá then. Rush to her and pull her out of that dubious vehicle, that shone like light, and glided at the speed of flight, though it had no wings, and in which sat an equally dubious son, convinced that a deception had occurred, had been committed by someone, perhaps by the son, or even by the mother herself who gave up on the land. For what they could not convince themselves of at the last minute, even as the car had raised its last clouds of dust and the sound of its engine had grown fainter, was that the wonder of the plenty had truly ceased. And they couldn't take that against the land. For a long time they just stood there, quiet, their eyes filling with the distances. Meantime, behind them, the fields lay quiet, revealing nothing, concealing nothing. The

wind began blowing again. But to no flapping of wings. The sky was empty, and the herons nowhere to be seen.

3

It was a kind of trackless desert, across which every vehicle was tracing its own path of dust in the lahar that had only begun to harden. They were all moving in the same direction. They were all moving at the same speed. No one was in a hurry. It was as though everyone was crossing the landscape in a kind of reverential silence.

These were the last of the evacuees, those who refused to vacate the city until the black cloud itself had swallowed the sun. Now they had no choice but to pass through the low-lying twilight plains that surrounded the city, the parts that had already been buried in ash. The lahar fields, where they were ashen gray, were for the most part still soft, and in places where they had hardened, especially farther out in the horizon, they were almost white, the white after a burning, of extinguished coal, and gleaming now with the smoke of dust, below a dimness that could well have been the absence of a sky. Scattered here and there across the barren fields, were outcroppings of roofs of what were once houses, now sitting atop, or emerging, it seemed, from the hardened lahar.

Beside one roof was crouched a thin old woman with a bent spoon. To passers by, it looked as though she were digging around her roof. Later, those who dared approach and actually ask her spread the little tale of an old woman who was digging her house from the earth, because her granddaughter was still inside.

Behind the vehicles trailed a group of big and small women in rubber slippers. Their feet were dusty, and they had baskets and bags on their shoulders, and children round their necks. They

were chatting to one another while walking, and it even looked like they were laughing.

At Station 4, a kind of stopover encampment, some of the vehicles broke their journey. The engines had to be given their rest, and water, too, to ease the fire. Here the people got out of their vehicles, and some even gathered, perhaps to endure the silence, but only in small groups, so as not to break it.

With neighborly ease, they began to come out of themselves once more, and some even began to chat, where they were going, how many hours they had spent on the road. But they stuck only to such small and practical details. No one broached the recent past, or dared mention anything as blatant as the future.

Only at some point was the stillness of that emergent gray world broken. A group of children, it seemed, had found a large white bird trapped—or something, its wing probably broken, one went as far as to claim. It was trapped on one of the higher rungs of the skeleton steel of an antenna tower, round which the children were now gathered.

The bird was letting out wild shrieks, which no human being could have possibly understood, but which the children naturally interpreted to be cries of pain. Its cries sounded sharper in all that surrounding sky in which not a single bird was to be seen.

But soon the cries of the children began to drown out that of the bird's. For one of them—a boy, one who had probably managed to escape the watch of his parents because they were currently preoccupied with their vehicle or some such grownup matter—had begun climbing the tower.

The boy was climbing the tower with such nimbleness it was almost brave—or frightening to watch. Among those who stayed below, the younger ones began to cry, perhaps in fear for

the boy, perhaps in imitation of each other. Some of the girls, the bolder ones, began to cheer for the boy. And even the other boys, those who stayed on the ground, joined in the cheering, or simply fell silent, perhaps to hide the conspicuous fact that none of them followed the brave boy's example.

All the children watched the boy scale the tower, some of them already calling the parents, others wishing the parents would not come yet. And still the boy made his climb, as though it were an all too important matter, as though it were absolutely necessary to demonstrate courage in that interval of the journey, or more simply, to save that single bird in the white fields of the new world, where there would be none.
