

JENNIFER TEETS

*Metallurgic Lethargic,
Lead Tastes Sweet*

DEFINED AS A PLACE FREE FROM HUMAN NEEDS and divine interests, *Nephelekokkygia* represents the most idyllic polis known to literature or, on the contrary, a cautionary example of a polis doomed by utopian fallacy. The ancient comic playwright Aristophanes thought of *Nephelekokkygia* (a term that has been rendered in German as *Wolkenkuckucksheim* and in English as “Cloud-cuckoo-land”) as a locus sandwiched in the upper air between the domain of paradisaical lambency and clammy Earth—the clouds. The allegory of *Nephelekokkygia* corresponds (uncannily?) to its morphed etymology: over the centuries the German *Wolkenkuckucksheim* became a synonym for daydreaming, while in English the term embraces those who flew over the cuckoo’s nest or, more literally, those scourged by naivety or delirium.

While these linguistic meanderings have their strongholds, I have always considered the “Cloud-cuckoo-land”

as a mental universe in which gods, humans, and birds meet to draw out their theories on the space and “place of life-bubbles” (or the fabulous art of “doing nothing”). Or, better contextualized here, as the place and space in time where the kākā birds meet, greet, and brood with the gods and humans. The question of space is crucial in the place of life-bubbles, for its “inhabitants” are not static beings but “entities entangled in complex processes of becoming.”¹

The entanglement of “becoming” in the space of life-bubbles could be described as follows. While no one has ever “seen” this place, a great deal is known about how it behaves, and there are widely accepted theories as to what it is like there. Matter billows and breaks into unrealistic idealistic states and forms in the place of life-bubbles. It is an outside with a peculiarly configured inside. Its falling atoms resemble Lucretius’s theory of the “swerve,” in which generative bodies of matter give birth to various things that dissolve after they are born. Atoms moving through this void are subject to *clinamen*: while falling straight through the void, they are sometimes exposed to a slight, unpredictable deviation. Quantum fluctuations drive matter fields into an isolated horizon, spontaneous, yet undisturbed. Atoms collide, giving rise to vortices and compound bodies of matter on a macroscopic scale. Life

1. Steve Hinchliffe and Sarah Whatmore, “Living Cities, Towards a Politics of Conviviality,” *Science as Culture* 15, no. 2 (June 2006): 133, quoted in Hamish Win, “Living Cities,” *Circuit Artist Film and Video Aotearoa New Zealand*, June 26, 2015, <http://www.circuit.org.nz/blog/living-cities>.

is driven into closer union and held by an entanglement of interlocking shapes. Ships and shoes and sealing wax and cabbages and kings conjoin in heaps, swirling in a dance of atomic relations. The world of life-bubbles swerves towards oblivion in the construction of a new kind of free will. Infinitesimally small changes of direction contribute to the course of an atom's further downward fall in its contact and collision with atoms. "If it were not for this swerve, everything would fall downwards like raindrops through the abyss of space. No collision would take place and no impact of atom upon atom would be created. Thus nature would never have created anything."²

Nephelokokkygia, perhaps as a direct influence of Aristophanes's writing on perfectly realized fantasies of space, time, and memory, has commonly been linked to the avian world, both vis-à-vis bird calls and the gaiety of song. In the place of life-bubbles, there is an unusual clustering and converging of color fields. Basic visual forms and shapes emerge from external incidences and angles that reach them from the birth star of the universe—the sun. In life-bubbles, blocks of pure gold light up in myriad ways like the scarlet and orange plumes of the glossy kākā that change color with variations in the light. Their basic shape, form, and the quality of being iridescent is attributed to the innate atoms of their feathers.

Therefore, blindness in the place of life-bubbles is potentially regressive because light is prerequisite to sight,

2. Samuel Sambursky, *The Physical World of the Greeks*, trans. Merton Dagut, 2nd ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), 163.

even though all things that emerge in light do not emerge *because* of light alone. Given the volatile and evanescent state of life-bubbles, perception and reality are a single spirit untethered, where glistening bodies and forms prove the most speculative of souls.

In contrast to common patterns of flocking and swarming on earth, movement is relatively invisible in the place of life-bubbles. To watch and speculate on the kākā, ordinary cloud-gazing humans sit on cliffs, staring out through a golden portal fabricated out of braided copper tassels and *passemblerie*.

They watch as the kākā consume toxic residues. The birds feed on lead-coated surfaces, for it tastes sweet to their tongues. The gregarious flocks arrive at the cliffs to await their evening feeds, and this is when they get their fix. A sweet metallurgic taste is prepared for them in receptacles on the cliffs by the mortals, as they fixate on them. Substances are pulverized in a mortar with a pestle and turned into a strange liquid when poured into the device. Upon the transformation of the liquid to a solid, matter turns pasty. The fix that it gives the kākā is overly satisfying. It is an addictive force linked to the strange communion with the humans. Rather than having immediate effects on the adult kākā, the toxic residues transfer to their offspring, the eggs, and by osmosis, their chicks.

The immortal gods, on the other hand, kneel to stretch what is below into endless vaporous curtains. If the place of life-bubbles presents itself to the imagination as the visible form of celestial imagination and toxification, then

the golden portal also exists as a passage for humans to access a fun-house mirror of debauched warpings and distortions.

Shakespeare's Mark Antony describes scalar hallucinations on the laminar flow of life-bubbles:

*Sometimes we see a cloud that's dragonish;
A vapour sometime like a bear or lion,
A tower'd citadel, a pendent rock,
A forked mountain, or blue promontory
With trees upon't that nod unto the world,
And mock our eyes with air ...*

For centuries oracle-mongers, or saints as we humans call them, have tried to decipher the elements that take the gods down, the humans up, and the birds about in the place of life-bubbles. Two speculations predominate. The first suggests that mountain peaks embrace the underbelly of the place of life-bubbles through a soft lace or a celestial umbilical cord, extending up into the heavens in a vaporous caress. The second proposes that life-bubbles implode in a marbled swarm above and below, making contact with gods, humans, and birds in an invisible form of courtship. The latter theory is, however, debatable, since life-bubbles generate spontaneously out of nothing. Is the form of contact between the gods, humans, and birds, then, a sliver of nothingness too?