

## Blue Skies Smiling

*By Dennis Payton Knight*

The sky starts at our feet and rises some 62 miles to the Kármán line where the air becomes too thin to sustain flight. The sky holds oxygen for our lungs and protects us from the white light of the sun. In doing so it filters away most of the blue wavelengths in a process that quite illogically makes the sky look blue. That is my scientific understanding of the phenomenon we call the sky.

Like the insects and birds that surround us, we have ingeniously conquered the skies using the principle of airfoil. We fly around the earth and to the sky's highest reaches. Sometimes we even pierce the sky with rockets to deliver man and equipment to explore and establish our spaces in space.

In the skies birds assemble to soar in long migration, and wander in search of shelter, water and food. Eagles, hawks and owls swoop from skies above to take prey, and other birds find fast refuge in the sky to escape predators on the ground. But it is not an entirely safe place for them, either, because aerial hunters sometimes snag prizes right from the air. Of course humans use the blue yonder to wage war against ourselves, but that is mankind's shame, and we should not blame it on the skies.

The songwriter Irving Berlin wrote the words, "Blue skies, smiling at me, nothing but blue skies do I see," and Hoagy Carmichael in another popular song wrote "Ole buttermilk sky, I'm keeping my eyes peeled on you."

Vincent Van Gogh made a name for himself painting the skies in a full range of shapes and colors, swirling clouds, blazing stars, and bright crescent moons. He, like others of the old masters, found form and color in the sky in ways to put us in awe of their vision.

But nature with its own hand paints the soaring blue to perfection, illuminating it by day, deepening it by night, and softening it with touches of clouds. Skies may be gray and rainy, and split in the violence of lightening. Or they may sparkle in the sun and glow in the light of the moon and stars. Nature daubs the edges of the skies at sunrise and sunset with purples and oranges, and when solar winds blow at earth's poles, nature stages exhilarating productions of northern and southern lights.

Where would we be without friendly skies to hang our kites or float our balloons? Where would we find space to perform aerial maneuvers? Or for small planes to drag banners and spin smoke in the blue to sell toothpaste or propose marriage?

The skies seem to play right to our emotional needs. In 1892 Walt Whitman, one of America's great poets, in a piece of prose wrote, "Out of the sane, silent, beauteous miracles that envelope and fuse me—trees, water, grass, sunlight, and early frost—the one I am looking at most to-day is the sky."