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# First Flight

(An excerpt from *Vigilia's Tempest*)

by Stephen Poleski

The boy's hands held a death grip on the hot, rusty iron ladder. The world below him seemed to be rolling off its normal course, spinning, things were beginning to blur. Frozen with fear, he found himself unable to go on. The blood pounding in his head had turned the green pine-covered hills around him to pink, and yellow, and red. Seen through the afternoon haze they should appear blue or gray. Aerial Perspective was what Leonardo da Vinci called this visual phenomenon in his notebooks. The boy had once thought that he wanted to be an artist, a painter; but there was no art in his town, so he had painfully worked his way through Leonardo's text, hoping to teach himself all that he needed to know. It was in these notebooks that he had found his design for a flying machine.

A cold blast of wind rattled the water tower. Sweat coated the boy's palms. On the ground it was a fine summer day, with only the occasional strong breeze. A sudden gust tore at the knapsack he had strapped to his back containing the fabric for the flying device, threatening to lift it free. The pack's straps dug into the boy's shoulders, the bundle of thin bamboo poles tied onto the bottom swaying to and fro. He hesitated. If he would be an aviator he must learn not to fear the wind.

*Others have done it long before I was even born; so why not me?*

Time seemed excessive, still, raw and sterile, of no use. Risking a furtive glance, the boy saw that he was higher than the hill where he lived, and where he had first tested his device from the roof of his father's garage. Grinning into the cool sky, he began breathing normally again. He had six rungs remaining before he reached the top. There was another puff, but not as strong as before; could the wind be dying down? Glancing up he wondered what came after the ladder reached the rim. Were there handholds continuing onto the roof of the tank? He had never been up here before. Fighting his fear, the boy forced himself to climb another rung. His movement, or was it the gusting wind, caused this ancient iron structure to vibrate, its motion giving off a hum, demonic yet singsong.

*Over I'll go and see what happens.*

What curiosity had drawn the boy to the water tower? What kind of degenerate, unstable elevator had whisked him to the top floor of the building, opening opposite the dim stairway to the roof, leaving him receptive to this abnormal temptation, the highest point on the highest structure for miles around? You could never get lost in this small mill town; wherever you were, just look up and there was the water tower.

The colorless, and mildewed, door to the roof had opened on a beautiful and fantastic vista, unvisited for many months, perhaps even years. This neglected roof exposed a seam in the boy's ambition, the sense of space, of being above it all, in touch with his hero, Leonard, in his tower, writing in reverse in his notebooks, penning ink drawings for parachutes and flying machines. The rough, mottled doorway to the stairwell was gone, melded into the wall; there could be nowhere to go except up.

*Over I'll go and see what happens.*

Looking around the boy's breathing slowed; the nearby hills had gone back to being medium blue, the ones farther beyond to a paler gray, just as Leonardo wrote they would. With apostolic zeal the boy's purpose returned, if not his courage. Slowly, he climbed another rung, and another, and then, making a

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rapid spurt, the final three. Pulling himself up against the weight of his burden, the boy gazed at the pitched top of the water tower, uninhabited except for six startled gray pigeons that took flight at his emergence. With jealousy he watched them leave; what a glorious gift they enjoyed he told himself.

*If only flying were so simple for me.*

Bathed in luminous midday sunlight, the slanted landscape below beckoned, but the boy still clung fast, immobile. He was unwilling to trade his grip on the last rung of the ladder to reach for the first of the handholds. Traffic went on in the streets below, a few people passing by. The small town looked unchanged, much like the old engravings that he remembered seeing in a yellowed book in the library. Were these pictures early aerial views? Perhaps the artist had gone up in a balloon, or had he climbed this very water tower?

The sky around the boy had become crowded with various species of birds, circling on an endless track, sounding his intrusion into their private space. Down below him people were walking around, grounded in their own realities. Few had an immediate need to contemplate death. If they chanced to look up their assumption would be that the figure on the tower belonged there; he was working, it was the time of the day for work; they were working, or on their way to work, or going to look for work. People did not necessarily think much about death until confronted with it, ignoring the irrational need to turn it into something of value. The boy knew that he was born to die, but first he wished to fly, and if this choice might hasten his death, then so it would be.

*Over I'll go and see what happens.*

His flying machine was a simply made affair of nylon fabric and bamboo sticks, lashed together with cord. The boy had assembled his device many times, but the pitch of the roof, and the wind, were making it difficult today. An audience had gathered in the streets, and a few people were waiting at the base of the water tower, with lifted heads and clucking among themselves. No one was brave enough, or foolish enough to climb the rusting ladder to try to get him down, but someone had called the police and the fire department. The boy could hear the wailing of the sirens as these public servants raced each other through the labyrinth below.

His fragile glider assembled, the boy slowly drew himself upright. Holding his wings open wide, he imagined himself a living crucifix taking possession of the sky. People in the crowd were shouting now; he could hear their voices wafted up from below. A fireman was speaking something through a bullhorn, perhaps addressing him. All the sounds were unclear, only background to the many thoughts that were beating in his head, and the wind rushing in his ears.

A sudden, strong gust knocked the boy down; for an instant the would-be aviator disappeared from the view of the crowd below. No one could see him grasping fearfully at the handholds. And then, in a flash, he popped up again, his courage returned. Had he lost all reason? Walking mincingly along the very edge of the water tower, he waved to his watchers, but that was not enough.

*If only flying were so simple for me.*

The boy could hear them clearly now; even if his audience did not dare express its pleasure it would never forgive him for stopping here. Their shouts compelled him, demanding everything. He gave it to them.

*Over I'll go and see what happens.*

Stepping from the edge of the tower, the boy felt the cold rush of wind on his face and the downward pull of gravity; a gentle jolt lifted his body as the homemade wings caught the air.

*I am free; I am flying.*

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But below him all the sadness of the world still waited.

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“First Flight” is an excerpt from **Stephen Poleski's** new novel *Vigilia's Tempest*. His writing, fiction and art criticism, have appeared in many journals, such as *American Writing*, *BookPress*, *Essays & Fictions*, *Leonardo*, *Lightworks*, *Many Mountains Moving*, *OE*, *Pangolin Papers*, *Satire*, *Shiny*, *Skylark*, *SN Review*, *Straight*, *Sulphur River Literary Review*, *Q*, *Wordwrights*, *D'Ars*, *Spazio Humano*, *Himmelschreiber*, and *Imago*. He has a short story in the anthology *The Book of Love*, from W. W. Norton, and has also been nominated for a Pushcart Prize award. A handmade book of his poetry, *Sky*, was printed by Loughborough College of Art in England. His novel *The Balloonist*, *The Story of T. S. C. Lowe*, *Inventor*, *Scientist*, *Magician*, and *Father of the U. S. Air Force* was published by Frederic C. Beil, in 2007. He has since published three other books, *The Third Candidate*, 2008 a novel, *Grater Life*, 2009 a novel in stories, as well as *Vigilia's Tempest*, 2010 a novel

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