

Cloud Gator

by Steven J. Kolbe

There's an alligator in the sky. Don't worry, I'm not on drugs. I don't mean a real alligator but rather an alligator made of clouds, or a "cloud gator" as they say down south. (I don't actually know what they say down south; I've spent the majority of my adult life in the Midwest where most of the dialect involves inventing new ways to swear without swearing).

The cloud gator triggers two memories simultaneously. First it reminds me of the time I held a live, albeit tranquilized, juvenile gator at a zoo in Florida when I was twelve. (Somewhere there's a photograph, no doubt, of me looking terrified and a gator looking asleep.)

The other memory is of a pixelated alligator that you may also remember from the early nineties. Well, you may remember it if you went to Waddell Elementary in Columbus, Georgia. The pixelated alligator was part of an educational computer game or, as we call them today, an MOOC. The object of this MOOC was to solve basic addition and subtraction problems. Whenever you got the answer right, the gator would gobble up the numbers.

The kindly school counselor would sit me down in front of the computer and marvel at my superhuman mathematical gift. $2 + 4$? Why 6, of course! $6 - 4$? Well, now we're back to 2! Afterwards, she would always say, "See you later, alligator." And I always knew my line too: "After a while, crocodile."

This all happened right after the divorce and right before my mom left the south for good.

The cloud gator outside my window is breaking up now. The wind is pressing his tail out into the blue distance, and as it does his entire body separates into fragments. For a moment it makes me sad in the way a popped balloon can make a child go all weepy and inconsolable. There was nothing animate about the helium-filled rubber ball, but it bounced along and had a pleasant shape and color. I'm also sad that my reverie made me miss his last few

moments of gator-ness. But I know that he will go off to be something else—a rabbit, perhaps, or a mailbox—and before too long his individual parts will fall to the earth as a refreshing rain. Then a short time after that, the rain will rise again into the clear blue sky. Incidentally, we will too, because while here on earth we may no longer be a family, *there* we all will be.

