



Little Lost Bat

Sandra Markle

Illustrated by
Alan Marks

With love for my mother, Dorothy Haldeman—S. M.

To Preston Primary School—A. M.

Acknowledgments

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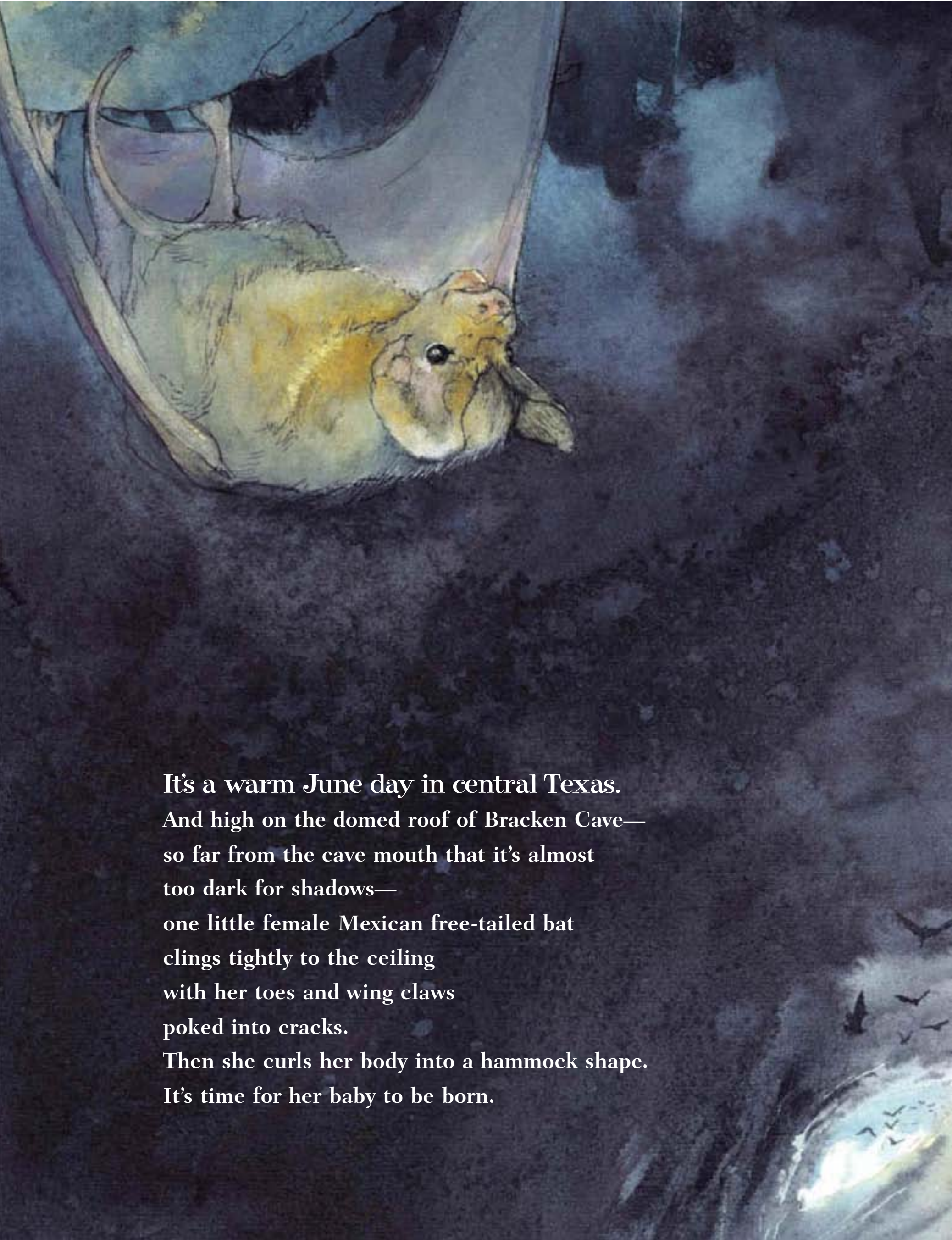
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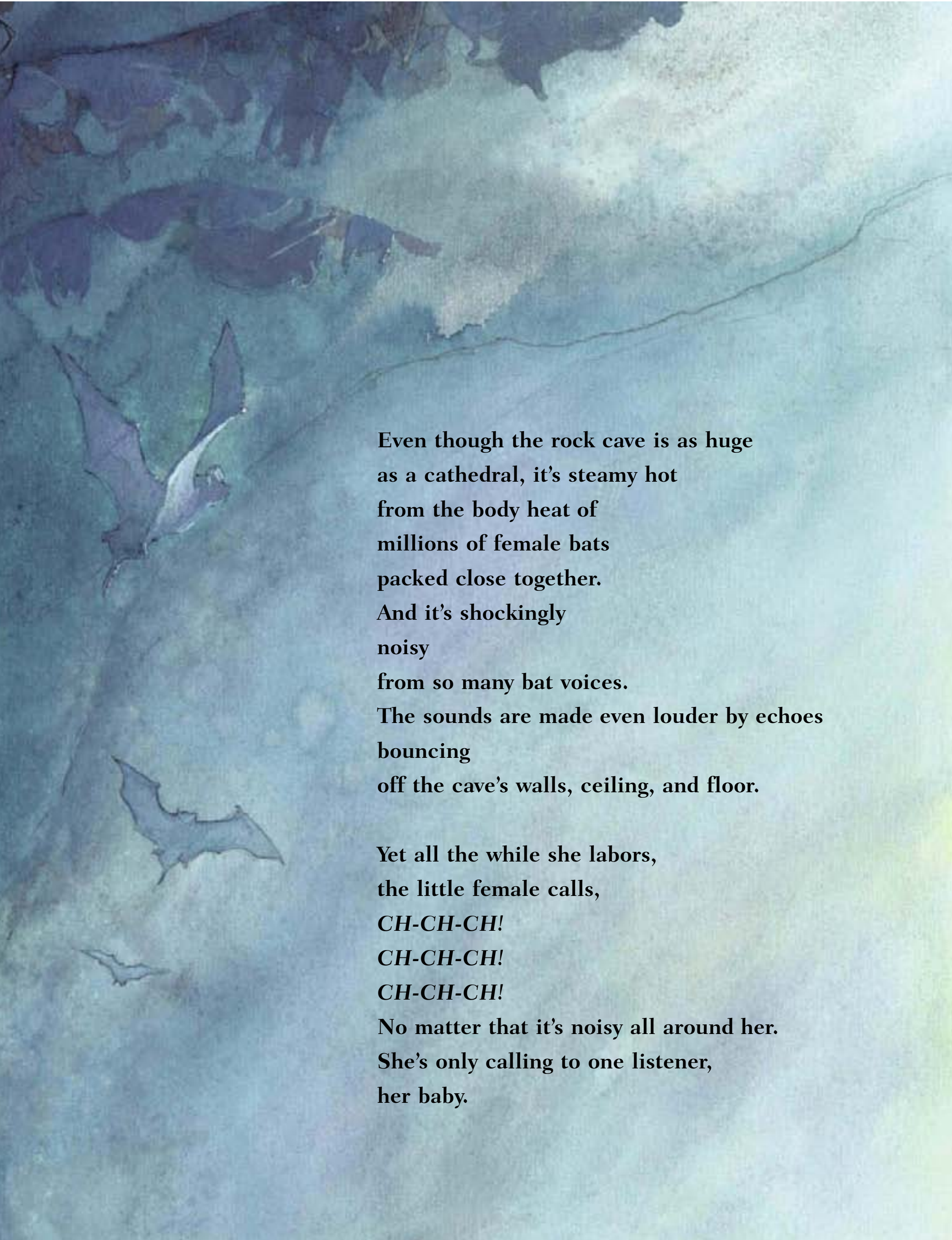
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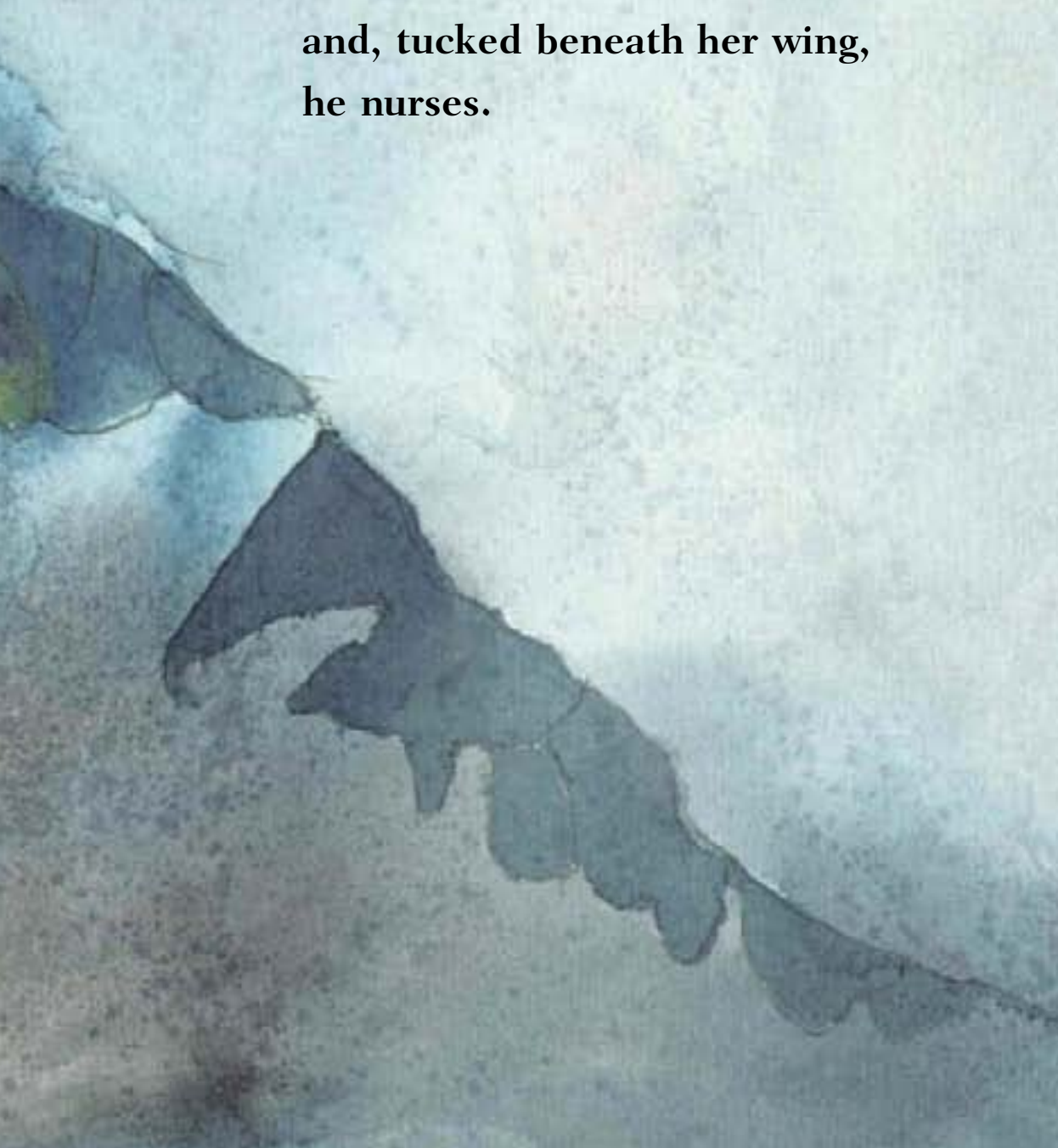


It's a warm June day in central Texas.
And high on the domed roof of Bracken Cave—
so far from the cave mouth that it's almost
too dark for shadows—
one little female Mexican free-tailed bat
clings tightly to the ceiling
with her toes and wing claws
poked into cracks.
Then she curls her body into a hammock shape.
It's time for her baby to be born.



Even though the rock cave is as huge
as a cathedral, it's steamy hot
from the body heat of
millions of female bats
packed close together.
And it's shockingly
noisy
from so many bat voices.
The sounds are made even louder by echoes
bouncing
off the cave's walls, ceiling, and floor.

Yet all the while she labors,
the little female calls,
CH-CH-CH!
CH-CH-CH!
CH-CH-CH!
No matter that it's noisy all around her.
She's only calling to one listener,
her baby.




And the instant he's born—
naked-pink and tiny as a peanut in its shell—
she folds up her tail membrane to keep him from falling
down,
down,
down
to the waiting, hungry beetles
on the cave floor.

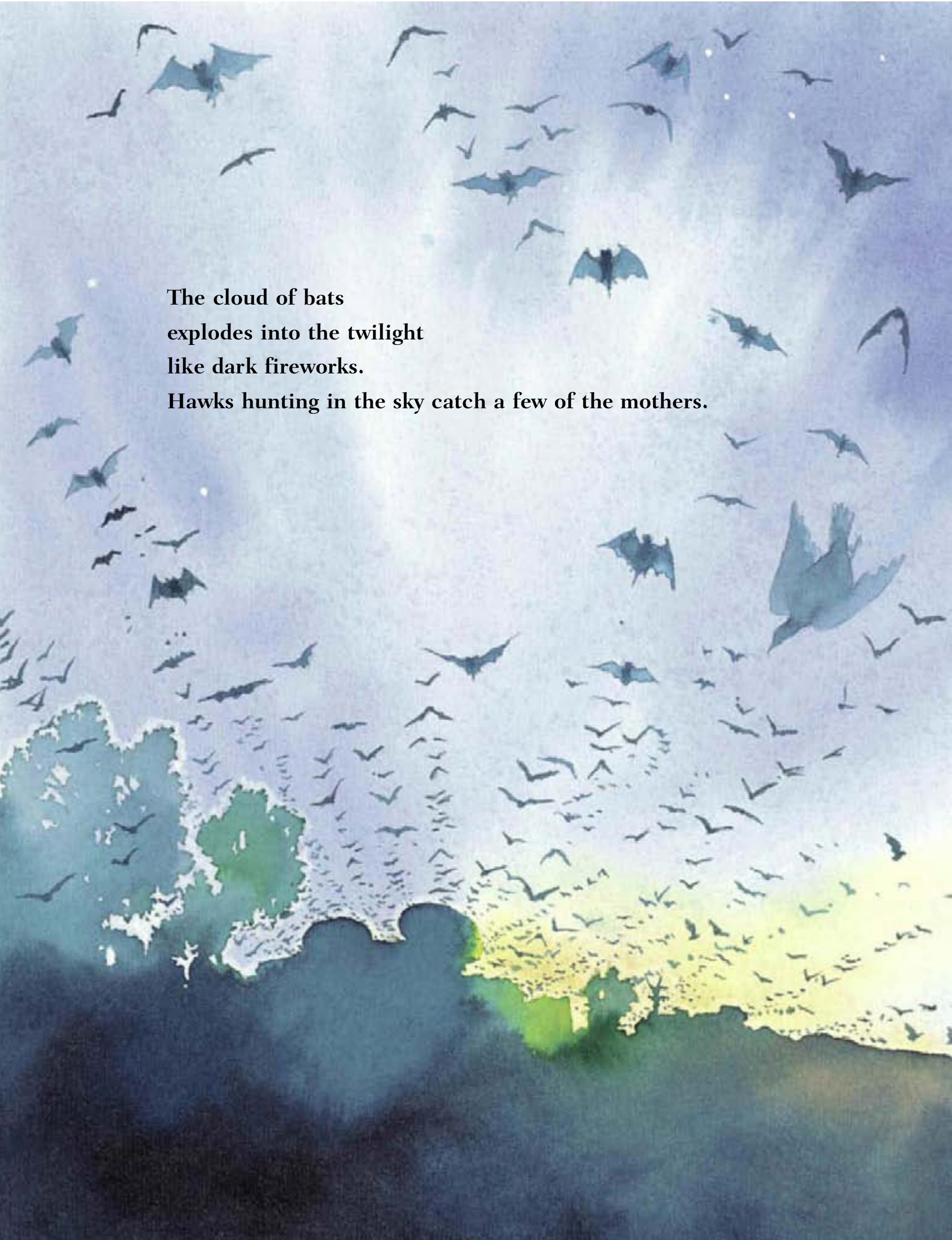
Then the little bat,
nudged by his mother,
crawls up onto her chest,
clinging to her fur
with tiny hooked claws.
There he finds a nipple,
and, tucked beneath her wing,
he nurses.



During the day, the little bat's mother
is only as far away as her roost.
She rests among all of the other mothers.
And she flies back a few times a day to her little bat
to let him nurse.
The babies huddle together
and wait for their mothers to return.
A snake lurking at the entrance
crawls across the cave ceiling
and snags a baby bat for dinner.
Still, there is safety among such great numbers.

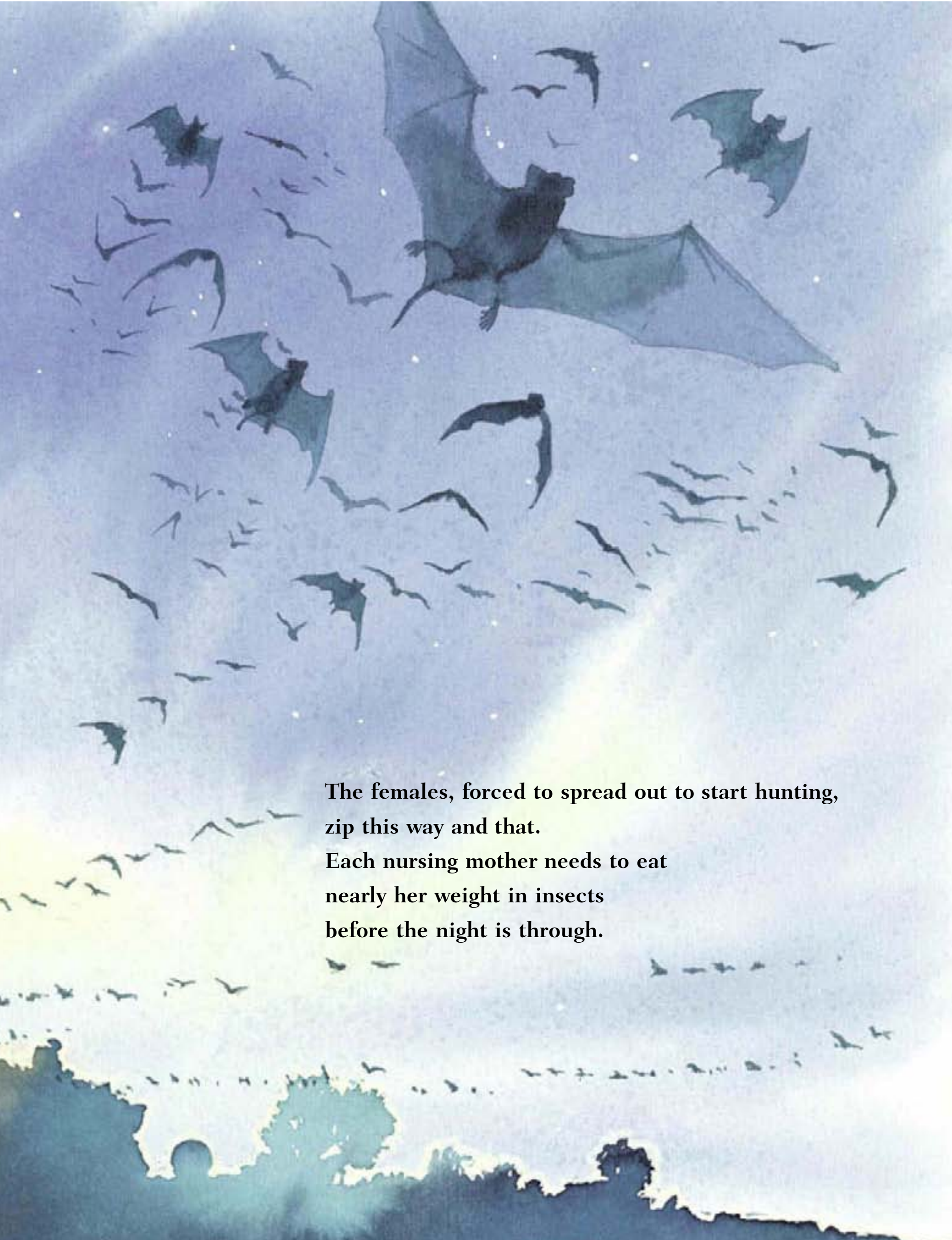


But as the day ends,
some inner sense lets the mother know it's time
to leave the cave and hunt.
With no partner to help her,
she has to feed herself
as well as her baby.
So the mother bat
joins the millions of female bats
racing out of the cave.

A watercolor illustration of a vast flock of bats flying across a twilight sky. The sky transitions from a pale yellow near the horizon to a deep blue at the top. In the lower-left corner, there are dark, silhouetted trees and a body of water. The bottom right shows a bright yellow and orange glow, likely from a setting or rising sun. The bats are depicted in various sizes and orientations, creating a sense of a large, active colony.

The cloud of bats
explodes into the twilight
like dark fireworks.

Hawks hunting in the sky catch a few of the mothers.



The females, forced to spread out to start hunting,
zip this way and that.

Each nursing mother needs to eat
nearly her weight in insects
before the night is through.

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