

FOR THE CLOUDS THEY TOUCHED

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY NOAH SNEIDER



I

Sometimes I wonder: Had they been flying long enough,
long enough for the drink cart to come down the aisle,
for the cart to bruise a wayward knee?
Had they been flying long enough,
long enough for the stewardess to serve apple juice to a restless boy,
for the boy to spill the juice onto Mother's pants?

What happened to the drinks from that cart?
Did they rain down with the bodies
in macabre cocktails,
gin and tears, scotch and blood?

What did mother do? Did she scream, or
did she tell the boy, "It's ok, honey, don't worry.
These aren't
my good pants."
They were not her good pants,
thank god. I loved her good pants: worn, but not beaten, green
like the grass of late summer and soft like the sun before the fall.

Sometimes I wonder: Who among them was in love?
Who among them had never known love?
Had they been flying long enough?



II

Father loved birds. When I was a boy, he would take me
on weekends to buy seed,
and together we would fill the feeder under the bay tree in our yard.
The feeder hung from a black pole,
a clear cylinder with holes.
We kept the seed in a silver trashcan
with a handle that latched,
a handle to stop the squirrels.
Father hated squirrels.

We would stand by the window
and watch as the birds landed.
He would point to their beaks and to their tufts of color, and he taught me
what they were called:
yellow-throated sparrows,
goldfinches,
stellar's jays.

Sometimes one would fly, unknowing, into our window,
and we would find it in the bushes, twitching,
or not.

Even after all these years watching the birds, I had not realized
the precariousness of flight.





They say mother birds must lay their eggs when formed,
or they cannot fly.
Nature has no overweight luggage fees.

“It’s ok, honey, don’t worry,” Father would say when the birds fell.
“It’s nature, it’s
part of the life cycle.”

And besides, Father once told me, most birds, once grown,
cannot recognize their own mothers.
They cannot mourn,
and they cannot be mourned.

They cannot remember
Mother’s call, the silver bracelets that clinked on her wrist
like so many bells or
spoons, saying, “It’s ok, honey, don’t worry.
I’m here.”

The birds know only the moments right before
the fall, the wind stinging their eyes, and the feel
of the clouds they touched.



IV

What did the clouds look like that day, from above?
Were they stringy webs or thick white sheets,
sheets like those that Mother spread over the bed in wintertime
after the frost began eating the window,
the window that looked onto the bay tree in the yard,
the yard that was both home to birds and home to squirrels?

Which restless boy, nose against the window,
saw the flying squirrel first?
What was the boy's favorite color?
What was the squirrel's favorite color?

If you asked me, I would say blue.
But I do not know what they would say.
I could not ask them, I did not have time.

I did not have time, nose against the window,
to ask, why do the shades have to be open upon takeoff and landing?
Strange creatures, these windows of airplanes.
Fly during the day and they show you the world of the birds,
the world of incredible heights.
Fly at night and they reveal to you the sky in all its darkness—
not the darkness of that which is empty,
but the darkness of that which is concealed.



V

Loss is all the things I didn't ask.

Loss is all the time I didn't have.

Loss is not the carnage

but the matted grass.



VI

Sometimes I wonder: Did they have time to complain about the food?

“Chicken or beef?”

“Neither please, I can’t eat this, I can’t stand this. I’ll just nibble on the bread, or maybe try the pudding—is that chocolate?—or maybe—another 10 hours to Kuala Lumpur?—oh fuck it I’m hungry give me the damn chicken.”

How do they hold all that weight, the airplanes,
how do they hold all those people with all that luggage,
and all those stomachs with all that chicken,
and all that cheese,
and all those eggs?

In ancient times in the lands where the airplane fell,
in the steppes and the fields and the forests of Rus,
the people worshiped Stribog, god of the wind,
Stribog, with his beard, thick and gray,
an old man wizened and wise, Stribog,
who appeared to the people as a bird.

Of the godly birds, the poet Balmont wrote,
“The legends of them are like light smoke”.

Like light smoke.



VII

They all smoked that night,
they the bodies
and they the parts
they the rebels
and they their hearts

Why do airplanes still have no-smoking signs,
if they no longer allow smoking?

They linger,
the illusion of control,
red, not blinking,
never off,
perhaps to say,
“It’s ok, honey,
you will not die,
you will not die,
today.”



VIII

A man, maybe a Father, fidgeted.
The seats were too small.

Why did we get economy?

Why does this fucking fat guy
have to be sitting next to me?

How much longer will we be flying?

He could hear Mother's voice,
"Never leave the house angry," she would say.
"You never know,
when you will die."



IV

These are the ellipses of a tragedy:
smoke and stains, fallen birds,
melted cheese and matted grass.
All the things I did not
have time to ask.