Where the Watchers Wait

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This dissertation titled
Where the Watchers Wait

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ABSTRACT

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Rachael Peckham's *Where the Watchers Wait* is a book-length work of braided nonfiction involving three separate tragedies. In four sections—Falling, Beacon of Fires, Flight, and Where the Watchers Wait—Peckham weaves biographical research on Harriet Quimby, America’s first aviatrix, with personal reflection on a plane crash that killed Peckham’s grandfather and uncles, with yet a more intimate confession of private grief and guilt. By intersecting these histories with an interrogation of her own past, Peckham confronts the dangerous desire to narrate the unknown and mythologize the dead. In her critical introduction, “‘Don't Go There’: The Transgressive Politics of Confessional Nonfiction,” she examines the long tradition of literary confession—from Augustine to Montaigne to Phillip Lopate—and finds that in the wake of the movement to de-center autobiography’s androcentric canon, there still exists deep-seated anxiety toward gender and genre in recent attacks on the confessional mode in creative nonfiction.

Approved: _____________________________________________________________

Dinty W. Moore

Professor of English
For the loved ones remembered in this work:

Susan and Cyrus Atefat-Peckham; Robert,

Douglas, and Dean Smith.
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CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

“Don't Go There”: The Transgressive Politics of Confessional Nonfiction

“Autobiography is only to be trusted when it reveals something disgraceful.”—George Orwell

“And when she came to the point of uttering that thing which she had concealed for so long, her confessor was a little too hasty and began to reprimand her sharply before she had fully said what she intended to, and so she would say nothing more, for anything he might do.”—from The Book of Margery Kempe

While the history of literary confession reaches as far back as Augustine—and later, to Montaigne, Rosseau, DeQuincey and on up to the confessional poetry of the 1950s and 60s—the trend toward popular confession in memoir and in the American milieu at large gives the impression that the confessional mode is a relatively new cultural phenomenon, one that’s been readily criticized (no thanks to the recent scandals of “false” memoirs). Whether the work is met with applause or vitriol, confessional writing elicits a strong reaction that I find equally compelling and ripe for critique, such as the charge of navel—and in one review of a friend’s memoir, womb—gazing, aimed at work that is found to be self-absorbed and excessively introspective. In the aforementioned attack, the reviewer complains that while the writer “can’t remember whether her baby was born in June or July 1973, the author describes vividly the harrowing experience of giving birth . . . leaving the reader wondering how much of her story is real and how much spun from an inventive writer’s brain” (Rev. of Surrendered Child). I hear in this attack a kind of anxiety toward genre (she can’t remember) if not

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1 Never mind that the writer’s honest admission of forgetting which month it was, “June or July,” speaks to the truth of the dizzying, confusing experience of giving birth and giving up a baby at sixteen. Why
gender (*vividly…giving birth*). All together, the trend of confession and the trouble trailing after, I'm afraid, threatens to eclipse its rich literary tradition—and in the process, overlooks more interesting and productive questions of the mode: What does it mean to confess? Whose work is called “confessional”? When does the confession slip from self-implication and inquiry into *self-absorption*?

To fully explore these questions is to first consider the canonical well from which contemporary confession sprang—that of the personal essay, a form more confessional by nature, I believe, than memoir. The essay, as it was “fathered” by Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592), derives from the French verb *essayer*, meaning “to try” or “to attempt.” (I’ve heard others describe the form as an “experiment,” and for E.B. White, “a stunt.”) Montaigne was driven by a genuine desire to intimately understand the self. His *essais* are characteristically short, digressive, conversational, and yes, confessional about everyday human experience. To this end, they are exercises in self-observation, no matter the “occasion” for his reflection or the topic at hand—and Montaigne's wonder at topics is limitless, as my writer-friend Desirae Matherly once illustrated in a tireless inventory: “prayer, thumbs, smells, cannibals, death, education, deformities, suicide, philosophy, his penis, marriage, solitude, sleep, idleness, predictions, names, habits, laws, colloquial phrases, sex, anger, armor, women, desire” (Matherly). “These are my

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doesn’t the reviewer ever consider the writer’s reasons for her doubtful treatment of this memory, when it would’ve been so easy for her to just pick a month using her “inventive writer’s brain”? Certainly, the best-selling memoirs of recent are invested in the economy of confession, which values stories that are tragic, sensational, disturbing—and most importantly, “true”—in exchange for an ultimate message of hope and recovery. But I would argue that such confessions are not *transgressive* but contrarily safe to write, for they are generally quite well-received (initially, anyway) for their appeal to an American ethos steeped in self-help and staked on the Dream of self-reinvention. For further—and no doubt better—thinking on this point, I recommend David Lazar’s essay, “Occasional Desire: On the Essay and the Memoir,” anthologized in the collection of essays edited by the same author, *Truth in Nonfiction*. 
fancies,” he writes in “Of Books,” “by which I try to give knowledge not of things, but of myself. [. . .] Let attention be paid not to the matter, but to the shape I give it” (Montaigne 47). In other words, the real meaning in his work is not to be found in a topic but in the way he “shapes” his thoughts on the topic.

Montaigne writes on these matters as though he is talking to a friend—and in many ways, he is, according to scholars who believe that “the father of the essay” sought to replace the good ear of his greatest friend, Etienne de la Boétie, whose death Montaigne grieved sorely. Given this epistolary posture, the personal essay seems to imply a close relationship with the reader/surrogate friend—also true of confession, as it both requires and creates the “non-empirical ‘you,” “ explains Susan Levin in The Romantic Art of Confession (13)—of whom the essayist is ever-mindful in the text. “This is the best argument against the charge of ‘navel-gazing’ or narcissism I have found,” remarks Matherly, “especially since Montaigne himself was conscious of the risk one takes when writing toward the self” (Matherly). In other words, the “risk” of falling into self-absorption.

Indeed, there is always some danger at the heart of an essay: an attempt: a stunt. For this reason, I find that the best confessional writing is inherently essayistic in its risk-taking, full of doubt, wonder, and self-awareness—which brings me to consider a few examples, leaving Montaigne for the moment to consider literature’s “first” confessor.
Confessing the Transgression

Augustine of Hippo (354-430 AD) writes in his *Confessions* to God, “I had prayed to you for chastity and said, 'Give me chastity and continence, but not yet.' For I was afraid that you would answer my prayer at once and cure me too soon of the disease of lust, which I wanted satisfied, not quelled” (Augustine 169). Though Augustine means to show how disingenuous his prayer was—Cure me, but not yet!—it poses an interesting question for the confessional text, both then and now: What desire does the writer hope to satisfy in confessing? Stated another way, how is the perpetual *not yet* tantamount to confession—that, like desire itself, once it is satisfied (“quelled”), it is no more?

Confession relies on this tension, this taut ache between *desire* and *deliverance*. In terms of writing, curing this “disease” too soon on the page is a sure killer of tension, as Augustine intuits. He begins, then, not with his fall into sin and licentiousness but with his earliest memories, wondering aloud about the onset of sin: Was he sinning in his purely selfish needs as an infant? No, he decides; God's grace enfolds us in infancy and childhood. What about when he and his friends stole fruit from a neighbor's pear tree in his “sixteenth year”? What was the real pleasure of this transgression?

It brought me no happiness, for what harvest did I reap from acts which now make me blush, particularly from that act of theft? I loved nothing in it except the thieving, though I cannot truly speak of that as a “thing” that I could love, and I was only the more miserable because of it. And yet, as I recall my feelings at the time, I am quite sure that I would not have done it on my own. Was it then that I also enjoyed the company of those with whom I committed the crime? (Augustine 51)

Augustine asks so many questions—of God, of himself—that I begin to ask, what is he actually confessing? That he is human? In all of his quirks and idiosyncrasies? All of
his sins and supplications? It seems to me his confessions are actually meditations on what it means to transgress—and in order to know that, he must first discover the nature and motivations of the self at the time of the transgression. Augustine writes that his “inner self was a house divided against itself” (170), a state of mind that he seems to regard as problematic and inhibitive to his appeals for Grace. But he is a trained rhetorician; he can't help his skepticism any more than Montaigne can his a thousand-some years later. What he calls a “divided house,” I’d say, is really the essayist's tendency to “think against oneself,” as Phillip Lopate quotes of Cioran in the seminal anthology *The Art of the Personal Essay* (xxx).

Here, confession is more than a “mode” of writing and definitely more than a model for prayer; it is *transgressive*, seducing and submitting to the reader all at once, both active and passive in its transmission of power. At stake in this fraught relationship between confessor and listener, between writer and reader, is the expectation that something will be revealed—something “true.” But there's also an unspoken rule of civility that one will follow the rules, not go too far, not trespass the screen dividing the confessional box. As a feminist confessor, I am always asking myself, what rules am I breaking? Am I allowed to do this? Just how far can confession go in its desire to satisfy—not quell—its lust?

In his introduction to the book *Getting Personal: Selected Writings*, Lopate ponders this limit with the opinion that if anything, what is wrong with most memoirs and autobiographical poems is that they don’t go far enough in their confessions; they myopically fudge the details, the close nitty-gritty of self-observation. I am endlessly interested in the wormy thoughts and regrets and excuses
and explanations that people have for their behavior. “Confessional” is, to me, a descriptive term, not a derogatory one. (ix)

Perhaps what this term “confessional” describes best is secular writing that, like Montaigne’s essays, sacrifices both privacy and social convention in a probe for honest, naked truth—an individualized truth but one that is no doubt interesting to the reader for its “nitty-gritty” inspection of the familiar, making it strange again (as the rule-of-thumb goes). In the highly anthologized essay “Portrait of My Body,” Lopate makes a painstaking study of his penis and its peculiarity of having two peeing holes: “They are very close together, so that usually only one stream of urine issues, but sometimes a hair gets caught across them, or such contretemps, and they squirt out in two directions at once” (Lopate 332).

Talk about going far enough.

What I find uncomfortable about this confession isn’t its unabashed self-exposure, which I rather admire, but the half-glance I suspect it would receive from the same critic who charged my friend with “womb-gazing”—and for a lot less penis-gazing than Lopate commits in the passage above. Cynical of me? Maybe not, for “the realm of the personal and sexual has always been literary for men (Saint Augustine, Rousseau, Michel Leiris, Henry Miller) and confessional for women (Colette, Erica Jong, Anaïs Nin editing out the references to sex in her Journal),” writes Lori Saint-Martin in her article “Sexuality and Textuality Entwined: Sexual Proclamations in Women’s Confessional Fiction in Québec” (29).

Saint-Martin argues, with a psychoanalytic-feminist flair, that women have borne more struggles than men in writing about their sexuality on account of 1) a lack of a “safe
space” and a language in which to represent their experiences, and 2) the limitations of the space and language that currently foregrounds confession: nonfiction. That is, confessional nonfiction discourages a woman's experimentation and play with sexual self-representation because “the longing for truth,” so prevalent in America, automatically assigns the written experiences to the author. This assumption, Saint-Martin claims, is made more frequently of women's writing (on sex) than men's, and thus creates an “anxiety” in women's work, limiting their fullest exploration of sexuality and experimentation with generic boundaries (Saint-Martin 29).

The latter—generic boundaries—contains both the problem and the prescription, in Saint-Martin's view. Ultimately, she calls for women confessors3 to wrest themselves away from the traditional (male) space and language that houses confession, for the refuge of “confessional fiction,” a hybrid-genre that falls somewhere between fiction and nonfiction. Saint-Martin finds support for her criticism in Québec, where “there are very few sexual confessions in the truest sense: a female subject writing a nonfiction work about her own sexuality and her emergence as a subject.” Here, the writing is more literary and less straight-confessional; more experimental with form and subjectivity and less anxious about the conventions of truth-telling in nonfiction (29).

I regret that the word “confessional” feels pejorative in Saint-Martin's model, but I cannot deny she is right to point out the double standard that falls along gender lines. (I will address her concerns with genre later, in a discussion of my own confessional nonfiction.) Haven’t I also privileged the foundation of an androcentric literature as it

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3 I echo Susan Levin's use of the word “in its original Latin sense of the one who does the confessing” (Levin 3).
was erected from the rhetorical confessions of Augustine; the quotidian essays of Montaigne; and, presently the art of the personal essays championed by Lopate? Every writer I have named so far has been a man, unlike my writer-friend who remains curiously anonymous here—for protection, I tell myself, against further maligning her memoir with the womb-gazing review. But must a defense of her confession rest on the literary merit of other male-authored confessions stretching all the way back to antiquity? Just whose tradition is this?

I am certainly not the first to ask, and the call to de-center the canon is hardly a novel idea anymore. Over two decades have passed since Sidonie Smith published The Poetics of Women’s Autobiography, and yet, her purpose for the project—to develop a theory around the ways in which women conceive of and represent the self—is still a necessary and relevant one, especially for this discussion. If the only confession valued is a “literary” one, as Saint-Martin points out, and that literature has historically excluded women, how does a feminist confessor make sense of her own position within this tradition? And if not in this one, which tradition(s) can she claim?

Transgressing the Tradition

Because confession implies a first-person subjectivity, the mode typically finds its niche in the zone of autobiography—and particularly, women's autobiography, as a practice still aligned with private and “personal writing” (Smith, Before They Could Vote 3). Smith situates the birth of women's autobiography, as a genre, in the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance, anchoring her survey in the Book of Margery Kempe, the
conversion story of a woman who loses her mind when she's denied the ritual of
confession during a childbirth so violent, she believes she will die. As Kempe tells it
(referring to herself in the third-person\textsuperscript{4}), “When she came to the point of uttering that
thing which she had concealed for so long, her confessor was a little too hasty and began
to reprimand her sharply before she had fully said what she intended to, and so she would
say nothing more.” She survives the childbirth, but with a mind tormented by devils
who “pawed at her” and “called out to her” at night (31). The terror lasts for half a year.
Miraculously, she is delivered from her demons one night when Christ appears and sits
on the end of her bed, “looking upon her with so blessed a countenance that she was
strengthened in all her spirit” (32). A conversation ensues, which Kempe relays word-
for-word—making this book especially transgressive for the way she “becomes a
privileged medium for ventriloquising the word of God,” explains Liz Herbert McAvoy
in the introduction to the edition she abridged and translated (15). Thus, Christ does
more than take the literal seat of the priest who refuses Kempe’s confession. He does not
receive her speech reproachfully, as the priest does, but engages in a dialogue that
becomes the material for \textit{The Book of Margery Kempe}.

Christ and the priest aside, perhaps the real judge of the confessions in \textit{The Book
of Margery Kempe} is the reader, in whose hands the book ultimately rests. Admittedly, I
was a cold judge when I initially picked up Kempe's book in a “History of Christianity”
course in college, for which I also read Augustine's \textit{Confessions} for the first time. I

\textsuperscript{4} Which, as McAvoy explains, helps to establish a more universal and objective voice, and hence, a more
authoritative one. Also, the third-person point-of-view probably served a purpose of self-protection against
the charge of heresy—of being burned at the stake, like others before Kempe (McAvoy 26).
remember the irritation I felt, page after page, at Kempe's hysteria\(^5\): “And when her body could no longer endure the spiritual exertion . . . then she fell down and cried amazingly loud. And the more she struggled to keep it in or to suppress it, so much the more would she cry, and even louder” (38). So much crying and falling down! Why did I hate her prostration so? And why was my reaction to Augustine's impassioned prayer different?

I can only guess that my response had something to do with the way Kempe identifies herself in the confessions as a “ruined” [read sexually experienced] woman in need of saving—”a true daughter of Eve” (65).\(^6\) At the time, I was also reading Hélène Cixous and other French feminists, who turned my world upside down and called for women to wrest their bodies from the phallogocentric tradition of Western language. From them, I learned that Western metaphysics is a closed system of definitions predicated on difference (male/female) that functions to repress women's bodies and female sexuality in order to neutralize its threat against a male, phallic power. (Cixous's prescription: “Write your self. Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth” [312].) All of this is to say, I wanted to hear the laughing head of Medusa—not the doomed daughter of Eve.

\(^5\) A charge no less misogynistic than *womb-gazing*, I realize now, though I have seemingly inherited its use from other critics. “See, for example, David Knowles, *The English Mystical Tradition* (London, 1961), p. 146: “There existed quite clearly, and from the beginning of her adult life, a large hysterical element in Margery’s personality,” notes McAvoy in her interpretive essay, “wonderfully turning & wresting her body;” Agonies, Ectasie, and Gendered Performances in *The Book of Margery Kempe*” (107).

\(^6\) To be sure, Augustine strikes a similar stance: As “a great sinner who became a great saint” (11). But he was also a highly-trained rhetorician, and I hear the hint of stubborn skepticism in his confessions—albeit soft as a whisper, but still audible in the interrogations of his desire and motivations. Kempe's confessions, on the other hand, are full of pathos, intense and high-pitched. Most of all, I am cringing at how misogynistic that last sentence sounds. I don't presume for a second that my self-awareness mitigates this misstep, but I do hope it performs the very qualities I value in Augustine's confessions, over Kempe's: his self-checks and chatty company.
Kempe, however, is not writing in the time of Cixous but in a time in which *mysticism*—the direct, subjective, and intensely personal communion with God—is the means by which women might define their selfhood without relying on the mediation granted them by the authoritative powers of male clergy (Smith 66). (Is it possible, then, that Kempe was a proto-feminist in her day?) Affective piety offered women a way out of the four paradigmatic “life scripts” defining female identity in this culture: Nun, Queen, Wife, and Witch—each a different shade of the Madonna/whore split. To that list, Kempe adds *Mystic*, and in the process, takes charge of her own confession.

Nonetheless, one begins to see the problems, the religious baggage, accompanying the very word *confession*. As Smith reminds us (à la Foucault), “The site of confession or self-exposure dramatically reverses power's conventional dynamics. The one who remains silent and who listens exerts power over the one who speaks” (49). Constructed this way, the reader of literary confession bears as much power over the writer as the other way around.

It’s no wonder, then, critics such as Saint-Martin bristle when the word *confessional* is applied to secular writing that explores sexuality—especially women’s sexuality. While Phillip Lopate embraces the word as “a descriptive term, not a derogatory one” (ix), Saint-Martin confirms that the word’s usage is more complicated for women writers, considering “the under-the-table sense of shame that the word *confessions* inevitably calls up” (43).
But what if that “under-the-table sense of shame” is what drives a woman to pick up the pen in order to examine, and indeed, to complicate that sense? To put it all on-the-table.

I went to see a priest once. To confess. Though I was raised in the Episcopal faith (“de-Cath,” as my Catholic friends joke), I never understood the concept of the confessional box until Father Ben invited me to sit down opposite him by the window, where a beam of sunshine cast a warm spotlight on me. I would’ve preferred a dark box split neatly down the middle.

(My inner self was a house divided against itself.)

Minutes before, I had dropped off a married friend at his place of work, situated behind an Episcopal church. But instead of driving away, I got out of my car and walked across the church grounds, into the parish hall, through the vestibule smelling faintly of candle wax, and outside the door of Father Ben’s office. I have a confession to make.

I knew my sin to be a “mortal” one—more so to my sense of selfhood than to the eternal state of my soul. Yes, an identity crisis of Margery Kempe proportions: Who was I, to do this? I wasn’t sure anymore. What did it mean? And what now?

Father Ben offered me a box of tissues. He stared at his clasped hands, and in a slow drawl—too slow—he asked what brought me here, to him? Meeting his eyes, I understood then what he was really asking: What was my desire in confessing?

7 I have changed the name—par for the confessional course.
8 Augustine, 170.
Years later, I would try to answer that question by way of some other, more pointed and painful inquiries directed back at myself and at my reader in an essay entitled “Appeal”: *Who cares to read confessional essays? What is it that you offer us when you offer up your personal story? How can I get you (the reader) to care about me and for me?*

By its very nature, confession requires a listener, observes Levin: “The relationship of confessor/narrator, listener/reader must come into play, an intrusion that relates to one facet of the interplay between lived and narrative events” (13). My project in “Appeal” was not to write about this power relationship, but to perform the interplay—sometimes seducing the reader; other times risking repulsion—in order to mimic (and indeed, manipulate) the pleasure and pain I felt in a past (manipulative) relationship which I sought to understand in the essay.

If there is a “thesis” here, it is this: The relationship between the writer and reader of sexual confession is a sadomasochistic one. The rules that govern attraction and repulsion, pleasure and pain, are no different on the page:

> Can the text be a site of action and passivity, a taking and a giving? Active in the writing; passive in the reading of it? Or, can it complicate the two, as in the command, *Tell me what you want to do to me?* I’m actively ordering you to have your way with me. Don’t laugh; I’m having my way with you, too. I’m telling you where to look. Here. And here.

> And—you know where—*here.* (Pridgeon 64-65)

Sexual self-representations are always a tango, a dramatic dance teetering on excess, dangerously near the point of tipping over, of *going too far.* Is this why the convergence of confession and autobiography is such a precarious enterprise—why critics and fact-
checkers find easy aim—and why scholars like Saint-Martin look for cover within the “safe space” of confessional fiction? Saint-Martin fashions her defense around three female Québécois authors (Lili Gulliver, Anne Dandurand, and Nicole Brossard) whose work is considered evocative and erotic, “but not to confirm the reader in expectations of a confessional truth: they lead the confessional reader into a labyrinth of confusion by blurring the confessional boundaries through fictional strategies” (28). These “fictional strategies” involve the writer’s adoption of a pseudonym; the ever-popular disclaimer, *any resemblance to reality is purely fictional*; and the invention of a diary.

I recognize these devices. When I became interested in writing about Harriet Quimby, America’s first *aviatrix*, I went to work collecting everything that’s ever been written on her. It wasn’t easy—not because the list is long but because it’s spread out among the special collections of libraries and historical societies across the country, requiring long road trips and written requests for noncirculated materials and pleas for copies. And still, most of what I found can fit comfortably in a couple of three-ring binders that hardly begin to reveal just *who* Harriet Quimby was—and *is*, to those of us still straining to hear the voice of a Victorian woman who drove a car, used a typewriter, smoked, never married, and “feared her body would be taken by physicians for experimental purposes” (“Miss Quimby is Buried”). Of course she would fear this fate—she who was always before an audience yet kept so much of herself tucked away inside. The better question—the one the essayist in me wonders—is not how I or anyone else sees Harriet Quimby but how she saw herself.
In Before They Could Vote: American Women’s Autobiographical Writing, 1819-1919, Julia Watson and Sidonie Smith—the same Smith I spoke of earlier, whose poetics largely shifted traditional thinking on women’s autobiography—write that “Quimby’s flight experiences contributed to remaking her view of herself as a future-oriented subject” (400). In “remaking her view of herself,” Quimby was, in a way, her own biographer. When her family left Michigan for California in 1888, Harriet’s mother, Ursula, refashioned her daughter’s background to include an education in Europe and a birthday nine years later than Harriet’s actual birthday. Smith and Watson point out the discrepancy in the biographical sketch prefacing Quimby’s article on her cross-Channel flight, acknowledging that while she perpetuated the personal myth outlined above, it’s more likely that “she was born on May 11, 1875, in Kinderhook Township, Michigan, and raised on a farm” (398).

On the Subject of Quimby: A Confession

I, too, grew up in Kinderhook Township on a farm. Harriet Quimby is the heroine of my hometown, the one who left Michigan to escape rural poverty—but also to pursue a life of adventure: first on the page as a journalist and drama critic; then on the stage as an actress and screenwriter; and finally, on the skeletal wings of a Bleriot monoplane, flying blindly across the icy Channel with only a compass to guide her and a hot water bottle strapped to her waist, this brilliant light pulsing in the dark industrial milieu of early twentieth-century America.
For the first time I was to fly by compass. For the first time I was to make a journey across water. For the first time I was to fly on the other side of the Atlantic (Quimby 402).

Despite the large following she had during her eleven-month flight career, surprisingly little is known about Quimby. She continues to be overshadowed by two tragedies: the Titanic, which sunk the day after her historical solo flight across the English Channel; and by her contemporary, Amelia Earhart, whose death remains a mystery and a magnet for conspiracy theories. In fact, the greatest sensation she would create was in falling out of her plane and dying on impact in the Boston Harbor during an air show.

Since Quimby lied about her age and birthplace, even the most basic biographical sketches vary and offer little insight into her psychology. No journals and only one personal letter have been unearthed so far, besides the articles she published at Leslie's Illustrated Weekly—a New York-based magazine for which Quimby wrote features pieces under titles such as “A Day with the Fishermen” and “Pleasures and Penalties of Motoring Abroad.”

Once I had my license I realized I could share the thrills of aviation with my readers. I wrote in the first person because they would feel closer to the events in the cockpit (qtd. in Holden 22).

Reading this, is it any wonder biographers feel permission to assume the same point of view in their portraits of Quimby? How strong the need is to “fill in the blanks” of her story or perhaps to close the gap—the distance between writer and subject—and
“feel closer” to her, to the “thrills” she describes? Is there not a thrill in this very experiment? And is it not the same thrill that drives “troupes” of community members to organize and form The Harriet Quimby Re-Enactors of Coldwater, Michigan? They will tell you, in their earnest recruitment of new members, that the purpose is an educational one—and, no doubt, it is, consciously. But there is something more to this performance, something endemic to the public persona of Harriet Quimby, who was first an actress, then a writer, then an aviatrix who dazzled crowds with her looks as much as her dives and loop-d-loops. She makes a fantastic figure—a word whose etymology includes the Greek phantastikos (literally “producing mental images”) and phantazein (“to present to the mind”)—on any stage, real or figurative (“Fantastic,” def.).

Yet the “canon” on Quimby, and this includes works authored by Quimby herself, is an obscure one with a strong cult-following. (As one biographer said in an offhand remark, “You won’t have any problem finding people who know it all about Harriet. They come out of the woodwork every time I speak.” Funny to me that this speaker—who, in the past, has dressed up as the aviatrix in her conference presentations—does not consider how she, too, poses as one of those people who knows it all about Quimby.) Nonetheless, this canon covers quite a broad array of genres that extends beyond biography, from children’s books to screenplays to the conceited Harriet Quimby Scrapbook.

But, by far, the most controversial and complicated treatment of Quimby, as a subject, belongs to the historical and romance novels penned by both men and women in the mid-to-late 1980s and 90s—books such as Jeanette Angell’s Wings (1988); Frank
Reed Nichols’s *One Brief Moment* (1997); and most notably, the imagined “autobiography,” *Her Mentor Was an Albatross* (1993), by Henry M. Holden.

It seems I could fashion my own case for confessional fiction around these three authors—one of whom is a romance novelist; another, an historical novelist; and the last, an aviation historian/biographer, respectively. Each recognizes a “good story” in Harriet Quimby, one with all the requisite qualities that make for an exciting read, full of enough romance and action to rival *Gatsby*: the beautiful single heroine’s rise from poverty to fame—literally soaring to new heights—only to fall back to earth like the star she was. Even her death was spectacular, shared with hundreds of gasping, some fainting, fans in the grandstand. If I sound crass, it is only in keeping with the sensational spirit of these narratives, evidenced in passages such as the one that imagines Sarah Martin’s (Harriet Quimby’s) death in Angell’s *Wings*:

> And then suddenly, everything wasn’t perfect, everything was terribly, inexplicably wrong. The man in front of her was moving, his vast bulk off balance. Had she banked too tightly? She had thought that she was being careful. Frozen with the horror, she saw him falling, as though in slow motion, falling out of the airplane, his weight moving it forward and down. . . . As the slow-motion horror went on and on, thoughts raced through her head: Eric, Eric, my love, I’m sorry. I said I’d never leave . . . . And then the Bleriot had tipped over and Sarah was falling, like a wounded bird from the sky. There was a great explosion of lights flashing in her head, and then, at last, everything went black. (Angell 127)

Angell (a pen-name?) is the author of several “racy” historical novels besides *Wings*,
whose protagonist, Sarah Martin, is clearly a stand-in for Harriet Quimby. I came to read

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9 Including a recent “memoir” entitled *Call Girl* in which Angell confesses her past experience working during the day as a part-time professor of sociology at a prestigious institution in Boston, and at night, as an *escort*. I put the genre in quotations marks because several of the reviews comment on how fictional the writing feels. But what’s more interesting to me is the book’s sequel, *Madam*, in which Angell assumes the
the novel when Larry Hoffman—former pilot, local history buff, and organizer of the previously mentioned Harriet Quimby Reenactors—chucked the book across the table and offered it to me, if I wanted it. Clearly, he didn’t approve. “It defames her to a great extent,” he regretted. “Hints at Harriet in a light that’s not appropriate or accurate at all.” And then, under his breath: “Too bad somebody can’t sue ‘em” (Hoffman).

He looked at me then, as though to say, maybe you’re that somebody. No, not somebody who would sue another writer—he could tell that much—but perhaps someone who could write a scathing review of those who defame our Harriet?

I’m not fluent in the laws on defamation and libel. But I know that if Angell’s guilty (of committing more than bad writing), then so am I. I, too, recreate the scene of Quimby’s death. I, too, imagine a lover for her—not “Eric Beaumont” (whose last name nearly rhymes unmistakably with Moisant, Quimby’s flight instructor), but someone who remains “unnamed” (the way she wanted it, obviously?) How could I not wonder? Every single work I read on Quimby, including Smith and Watson’s brief bio, makes a point to mention her unmarried status—often, as a source of intrigue and speculation. In the aforementioned Harriet Quimby Scrapbook, Giacinta Bradley Koontz notes, “Harriet’s entire love life remains cloaked in mystery, although an article by her friend Clara Bell Brown several years after Harriet’s death reveals Harriet’s youthful unrequited romance with an un-named ‘Latin’ artist” (Koontz 17). This quote not only forms a nice

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voice of a friend and fellow call girl named Peach. Madam might be the perfect example of what Saint-Martin calls “confessional fiction,” for Angell herself appears as a character several times in the narrative, and in this way, she is able to explore a “dangerous subject” safely. The “major traits of confessional fiction,” Saint-Martin addresses, “are thus to be found on the level both of content (the intimate adventures of a female subject addressing herself to a female reading community) and of rhetoric (playfulness, self-consciousness, indeterminancy” (Saint-Martin 32-33).
epigraph for my persona poem, “The Writer Plays ‘Hazel’ Quimby in Love”—of which there are several in *Where the Watchers Wait*, but it also serves as the occasion for an exercise in performance, both of Quimby and the stereotyped “Latin lover”:

Plug your ears, Mother; I’m playing Sappho, no Romeo, in an unrequited romance with an un-named Latin artist with his un-mentionable big part in this play—so this is flight—unlocked in the body’s rocking. [. . .] He used so much paint, mixing and swirling it into little pools on the palette, color you could lose yourself in when he tells you his mother taught him about the motion of celestial bodies when he was ten. But by then he was already un-named and would remain there forever in my mind: long black hair, red cravat, corduroy suit pulled tight and wet under the arms as he etched his motherland for hours, sweat collecting at the brow.

Though I will never know firsthand her experiences—and, indeed, can only approach them through imagination—I feel as if I recognize this woman. Why? Because she was a writer and a woman of her own making? Because we grew up on the same land? Because tragedy and flight form a dark crossroad in both our lives—mine, in the past; hers, the future? If she was a “future-oriented subject” (400), am I past-oriented, haunted by events that happened before I was born? Do these common denominators give me license to make a subject of her? And if so, would the reader see right through her and into me, my fears, and my desires? It has always been my belief that, no matter the topic, the self peeks through the curtain. Even without the personal pronoun, the writer can't escape her subjectivity. I know of no other way to write of Quimby—or any subject—without confronting these anxieties, as I do in the opening section of *Where the Watchers Wait*:

*I knew* from the beginning that Harriet Quimby had spent her early years on a farm just a few miles from the very farm I called home, growing up. But I didn’t care much for regional history then. I was in my own world—
a nice way of saying spacey—and as late as a few years ago, still shrugged at the Quimby name and the suggestion that I should write about her, as my mother had proposed so many times. But unless that her was me, I didn’t pay much attention, sadly. It wasn’t self-involvement, exactly; I just didn’t feel confident enough to speak as an authority on any other subject but my own experience—especially not that of a woman who died almost a hundred years earlier and is virtually unknown today.

The “unknown” provokes both anxiety and wonder. I cannot separate them out—nor would I care to; I need the former to keep my flight-of-fancy in check and the latter to set it free again. In both, there is restlessness, alertness. It travels down and deep into the body’s seat. In this state, I feel as though I could spring from the desk and take off in a dead sprint, so urgent is the need to act. Is this what I recognize in Quimby? That immaterial force I cringe to call energy. I confess, I tried to see a “spiritual advisor” on this point—got as far as her living room with “a list of questions, not about the future—I [didn’t] want to know anything about that—but about Harriet’s birthplace. And what happened in her plane when she crashed? Is there a psychic or spiritual connection between me and this woman?” (“Of Psychics”) Little did I know—perhaps conveniently, for I was nervous—spiritual guidance requires an appointment. I was turned away, left in the company of questions I would have to work out—or try to, anyway—by myself on the page. Now I see it was better that way. I rather prefer confession over clairvoyance; to achieving a clearer hindsight over foresight; to examining what lies beneath the surface (our secrets), rather than projecting out past the senses. I suppose what I am talking about is consciousness, self-awareness—so crucial to writing nonfiction and, especially, confession. I knew that if I were to write well about Quimby, I would have to do more than imagine what her secrets were. Musing about her secrets was starting to feel cheap,
without examining my own. With less than four months to go before deadline, I rewrote
the beginning of my manuscript, changed the title, and finally resigned to what I had been
resisting for six years since that day in Father Ben’s office. Once again, I had a
confession to make.

Apologia for Confessional Nonfiction

The man I dropped off that day was married to my mentor at the time. We were
all living in Georgia then—the man, my mentor, and me—adjusting to life in the South,
each struggling to cope with our private loneliness and to find distraction from it. We
attended readings and conferences, argued over music and Billy Collins’ poetry, ate cold
pizza on the deck overlooking a clay-bottomed lake as warm as bathwater—not like the
lakes in Michigan, we joked, the ones you capitalize. Some years prior to that, I had met
them, Susan and Joel, during my sophomore year in college when I signed up for an
elective course in creative writing. It was the first class Susan would teach at her first
tenure-track job. The workshop marked an important introduction for me, as well—not
only to the genre of creative nonfiction, but to a woman who would profoundly influence
the directions of my life and my writing.

Much of the work in Where the Watchers Wait retraces this path in an attempt to
better understand why, and perhaps how, I was drawn so fiercely to Susan and Joel.
Their own paths followed a winding course they loved to recite from state to state. They
were always on the move—in part because it was all Susan knew. Her parents were
Iranian immigrants who fled Tehran during the revolution and raised their daughter in
Switzerland and, later, in New York. She attended college at sixteen on a full ride to Baylor. And at the last minute, she backed out of medical school—she dreamed of practicing medicine in Africa—to write and study poetry.

I listened to her life story, so full of mystique, at a time when I was just beginning to form my own, “fresh off the farm” (an idiom I both hate and find myself committing) and freshly graduated from college. Is this why I agreed to follow Susan—at her insistence, which flattered and frightened me—to a small graduate writing program in central Georgia? Did she know I wouldn’t be able to turn down the invitation? Susan mesmerized me. I simply wanted to be near her, to stare unabashedly at her long eyelashes, at the thick, even eyebrows framing her dark eyes. One time I actually reached out to touch the wave of hair cascading down her back. (It was coarser than I imagined, yet obviously soft from ample brushing.) She didn’t flinch or look surprised by this petting. I think she must have been used to it, the way pregnant women tolerate having their stomachs always touched.

In this spirit, I doubt she ever wondered whether or not I would want to follow her. She was not egocentric, but she seemed aware of her power to attract the old and the young, men and women to her—a power she accepted humbly, graciously. The attention had become a part of her life, especially after she won a highly prestigious national prize, and she seemed intent on making “good” come of it. Poetry was her activism, her medical practice in Africa. She started reading Rumi and turned heavily to mysticism some time after we left Michigan.
All of this is to say that Susan understood mentorship *spiritually*. And this approach met a deep need in me. I felt I needed to be working with her—needed to continue the project I had begun under her direction: a long, elegiac essay on my maternal grandfather and uncles, killed before I was born in a plane crash. Susan understood my need to write about this loss, while my own family members did not. “Don’t go there,” my father pleaded. “Don’t make your mother revisit that time.”

But I *had* to know—not the cause of the crash but who these men were and why I heard their names whispered only during the “Prayers of the People” every Sunday. *Robert, Douglas, and Dean Smith* appeared only in muted tones and soft brush strokes in a painting as big as a ping-pong table. The portrait—painted from a picture of the three men posed on a tractor—hung for years in the living room of my childhood home. And for a while, in the basement. And now, upstairs between the bedrooms, standing guard over my dreams when I visit. Someone, probably my mother, keeps moving it around. I can’t decide who among us is most restless. I still find myself studying the painting hard; the checked pattern of Doug’s shirt; the straight bill of my grandfather’s hat; the curve of the cornstalk brushing Dean’s hand—all done with an impressionistic touch.

Yet when I try to imagine their faces away from the painting, I find it hard to do. I tend to superimpose those of my own dad and brothers: three farmers, three men similarly spread out in age and all with similar features. (This is true, especially, of my younger brother Jonathan, who resembles our uncle Dean in both manners and looks, right down to his penmanship.) I’ve become terrified that the cliché will come true—that
history will repeat—and that I will lose the men in my family, just as my mother lost hers.

Writing, then, has not been a way for me to know who these men were—a futile effort from the start?—but a way for me to stand back and notice the fears and desires coloring my own portrait of them. And what I see is something of a romantic longing in me. Toward the Smith men. Toward Quimby. Susan. All tragic figures. All shrouded in mythopoetics, confined to a picture that will never be them, but a reflection of what the viewer wants—or rather, doesn’t want—to see. This is the position I assume in Where the Watchers Wait: I am my own voyeur. (A position that Joel describes as being a watcher of your own thoughts.) And I accept the risks in this tight-rope act—that I could very well fall into narcissism and self-absorption on my way to self-awareness and self-implication.

I never intended to write about Georgia. About what happened there, with Joel. For so long I resisted examining this experience in writing. Part of me was just tired of talking about it, of telling our Love Story in person—of how he came to be my husband. If there was no avoiding it—on the page or in person—I treated our illicit involvement as an affair of the heart. That old romantic longing in me. The truth, however, is harder to approach. It’s not romantic—and it’s also not entirely ugly. I echo Saint-Martin, that “any view of sexuality that does not consider both ‘pleasure and danger’ is a dangerously naïve one” (44). I know of no better way to “consider” the truth in this statement than in
nonfiction, and especially in the personal essay—a form that revels in contradiction, consideration, and complication.

“Confessional fiction” may work to free up other women in their explorations of sexuality, but I wasn’t interested in finding a “safe space” in which to do this, for fear I might slip back into safe, comfortable avoidance. Rather, I wanted to *lean toward the discomfort*, as Kathryn Harrison says. (And no one can attest to this better than Harrison, whose 1997 memoir, *Kiss*, confesses to a sexual relationship she had with her estranged father when she twenty years old.) Confessing in fiction is indeed transgressive in form and theory, but it would not have allowed me to fully explore the *experience* of transgression—not only the act itself, but the writing of it—in a way that felt direct and honest.

As for Saint-Martin’s objection to the “shame” shackled in a word like *confession*, shame is a real subject I wrestle with in *Where the Watchers Wait* (the shame of betrayal; the shame in voyeurism; the shame of making my mother “revisit that time”); I cannot neatly eradicate it from my experience by simply turning to fiction. If I were going to confess (i.e. “go there”) at all, I had to go all the way.

I suppose my point is this: There is not room enough in the “safe space” of confessional fiction for the kind of commentary and self-reflexivity that interests me. That’s not to say there aren’t moments in the manuscript full of “playfulness, self-consciousness, [and] indeterminancy” (33), but that the reader is signaled to read them as such—as musings, wonder, *flights of fancy*—whether it be in a title (“The Writer Plays Hazel Quimby in Love”) or other formal experimentation. On that note, it seems Saint-
Martin and I are in total agreement on the necessity in confession for a hybrid genre—one that is “playful, self-consciously rhetorical, both/and rather than either/or”—one that “emphasizes the declarative, even performative nature of women’s sexuality as brought into being through writing” (43, 44). Indeed, if there is a fictional element in confessional nonfiction, it’s in the performative art of narrative itself—or in subjectivity, in the construction of an “I”—or in the artifice of dialogue. And this is true no matter what the genre or canonical tradition. As Levin recognizes in the work of De Quincey, Lamb, and other “Romantic confessors” who helped pave the way for the genre we now call creative nonfiction,

…”A certain amount of fictionalization must occur as soon as experience becomes rhetoric. Romantic confessions keep the common-sense fact of referentiality in front of the reader even as they suggest the possibility that language establishes identity. Depending on language to set out a self, romantic confessors can be seen as engaging in a basic statement about the creative potential of language, the idea that words create rather than reflect. (Levin 9)

All the more reason, perhaps, the stakes in writing confessional nonfiction are so high. I must be very careful with this “creative potential”—with how I represent real people’s lives. It is dangerous, this writing. Even before the tradition of the Romantics, and certainly beyond, confession doesn't allow for neat or comfortable answers; like Montaigne—and before him, Augustine—I stake my trust in those answers that are hardest and most “dangerous to believe” (qtd. in Langer 63).

On this note, I bristle at Saint-Martin’s assumption that in “‘true confessions’…” [there is] a fairly straight-forward, unproblematic relationship between the narrator-author, the text, and the female experience the text describes” (31). This has not been my
experience at all. Rather, I feel I am constantly commenting on those very problematic relationships that Saint-Martin mentions—if not directly in the prose with a comment or a question, then indirectly with the collage form. There is always subtext in collage, always meaning underpinning the order, and that meaning is multiple. A reader isn’t just interpreting what the prose says; she is reading its arrangement, which evokes a tone, as I was conscious of while writing of the critical moment when Joel confessed to me of his and Susan’s unhappiness:

He is turned in his seat with a stare that searches for some recognition of truth, pleading for me to help pull him back from this awful precipice. Or to join him, it feels. But I can only follow the double lines stretching before us—and with them, the gradual realization that I have merged onto suicide stretch without really thinking about it. Without really knowing what I am doing at all.

The author, however, knows what she is doing. After this section, the next one begins with “the other woman listed on the air meet’s program that bright July day in 1912. . . .” Of course, the stock phrase by itself is a cliché, but it proposes a double meaning in this context.10 The indeterminacy suggested in the italics serves a rhetorical, not an aesthetic, purpose. That said, collage—like any form—is ideally an extension of the content.11 In order to write about the tragedies that killed Quimby, the Smith men, and Susan, I felt I needed a form that was disruptive. Writing a more cohesive, seamless narrative feels counter-intuitive to the way we experience violence. What’s more, there isn’t one seamless narrative in Where the Watchers Wait; I juxtapose three personal histories.
throughout the text: my own, Quimby’s, and my grandmother Ruth’s—at last, not that of
the Smith men, for I discovered that the story isn’t about these men who died in flight but
about the women who were left waiting on the ground.

Such content requires fragmentation and fracture in order to complicate the very
messy, problematic relationships between the author (me now) to the narrator (me then)
to the experiences being described. It is painstaking work, trying to sort it all out; there is
nothing “straight-forward” about it. I would hope that my “true confessions” are as
fraught with contradiction and convolution as the transgressions in Georgia that prompted
them.

Confession is politically risky, but it doesn't require courage. You're so brave;
*thank you for sharing:* the stuff of self-help. It's neither courageous nor difficult to write
of transgression. That's the easy part: the desire, the sex, even the imminent guilt. No,
what's hard is retrieving the mind of the self as-she-was-then, of melding her into a
persona that feels not whole—that'd be a lie—but *true.* Recognizable to both writer and
reader. That's the real, the only “recovery” confession can hope to commit, and it doesn't
happen at the book's end. It isn't a point measured anywhere on the narrative arc. Indeed,
it isn't a place “to go” toward or not. It's the narrator herself.
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WHERE THE WATCHERS WAIT

“The aviator who is lost feels no helping hand reached out to him. He looks for no one. There is nothing to do except to keep an eye keenly on the watch for some friendly spire, some sign of a well-remembered meadow or spread of water, indicating the location of the aviation field to which a safe descent can be made. But it is never hopeless, for the aviator knows that if darkness supervenes, it will, in all possibility, disclose the beacon of fires of watchers on the field. If one has not flown too far away, he can easily recognize, from his commanding place of vantage, the blazing pile where the watchers wait.”—Harriet Quimby, in an unfinished manuscript entitled “Lost!”
FALLING
The crowd watched her fall—those who didn’t turn away or faint—through a thousand feet of air. Craning their necks and shielding their eyes, the image didn’t compute; something had fallen out. A suitcase maybe, or a coat—”as if some flimsy black things had been overthrown.”¹ They knew it was windier that high up, where currents sweep away dots of un-tethered balloons until some ethereal grip loosens and they float down at the feet of strangers. If only this too could be grasped again, the shape growing more discernible by the second: “the flutter of something like a human arm clutching at the air.”² A jerking black form. The body in free-fall.

What does the body experience in such a flight? I’ve heard it said that prior to the point of impact, the heart arrests—in shock? in surrender? in self-defense against suffering? or from all of the above—when there is nothing below but blank space. Do we not all die, in some form or another, from an attack of the heart?

But there are some who do survive a great fall: sky-jumpers whose chutes never open; tenants who leap from flames five stories high; even the emotionally distraught, whose escape on a bridge is planned. In these airborne moments, what do the senses register? Certainly, the body is stunned to feel skin rippling in the rush of air around it, hair and cheeks flapping, looking almost cartoonish. What might the unconscious mind already know at this point? Where does it go?

In narrative, too—as I wield it here—there exists a moment before impact, before the subject is named, when the jerking black form could be any of us clutching at the air, clawing for something to hold onto in all that white space. The foothold we find in the
story is our own, carved out by our imagination and desires. It feels good to know what can’t, or shouldn’t, be known. And what should.

*

Earlier that day, on July 1, 1912, two men flipped a coin and watched it fall. That simple, to leave it up to chance—what are the odds?—to settle it once and for all, fifty-fifty. That's how William Willard, manager of the Third Annual Boston Aviation Meet, and his son, Harry, settled the question they’d been trading all morning: Which one of them would be the passenger in Harriet Quimby’s plane?

It must've been fun, their battle for the seat; I can almost hear the banter about sitting behind this satin-clad aviatrix in leather boots that lace to the knees—how she makes a man forget that he's left the earth. Or did they balk at the risk they were taking in following her? Like some Helen of Troy, they laughed, she could be their downfall.

“Heads or tails?”

Father and son arch their bodies forward to see which way it lands on the arm or, if it is really gusty, on the sand. Then stuff the coin back in a vest pocket, warm with body heat, where it remains forgotten for the rest of the meet. Or perhaps it's awarded to a small spectator of the toss, a child fidgeting with the excitement of soon seeing for herself this aeroplane and of watching a woman enter the air and disappear behind a cloud. It must've seemed like such magic.

And then there is Harriet Quimby herself, a mesmerizing woman. There's something about her, the people whisper, they can’t put their finger on. The biographers all write of her “flashing green eyes.” Something in the way she holds you in her gaze,
never blinking, as though engaged in some contest she knows she’ll win. In this scene on the beach, I imagine she extends her hand: “Charmed.” Unsure of whether to take it—what’s the fashion?—you do, anyway, and feel surprised, even slightly unnerved, by the taut web of bone you clasp in your hand. This is America’s Birdwoman. And she is ready, at last, to take up a man.

William wins the toss. I imagine Harry taking his loss in stride. “It's your neck, Pop. Enjoy the ride.”

*

The tide was low when Harriet and William fell. They found the aviatrix and her passenger in only four feet of water, planted in the mud flats. Part of their clothing had torn away at impact.

They fell out of the plane? I nearly dropped the newspaper article—the first of many I would read—when I came to this part. Certainly, the writer intuits this reaction, times it carefully, just as I do. I keep narrating it to myself, a scrolling text that I work and rework to entertain myself in line at the post office or at the store: The crowd watched her fall a thousand feet through the air....

But I am wont to say it another way: She is finally soaring. Broken loose from all that constrains her to the present; to the earth, which she has loved as best she knew how, admiring it from a great height; to men—loving them too from afar?—and their machines, like the one she has conquered now, having flown in and up and out of it.
I first heard Harriet Quimby's name in local folklore about the cavalier young woman who left southern Michigan, where she was born—down the road, allegedly, from the land my own family has farmed for seven generations—to find her fame in the sky. Harriet is our hometown heroine. My mother was always nudging me to write about her, to make the aviatrix the subject of my English papers and, later, of the feature articles I wrote during my internship at the Coldwater Daily Reporter. Perhaps I resisted her prompting for no other reason than the childish impulse to push against the parent. I'll do what I want to do.

Sometimes I think Harriet Quimby prefers it that way: a battle of the wills. Now I feel as though I am literally chasing her around the stacks of libraries, or through the streets of my small town, in search of a letter or an obscure photo in my search to know her. A search that began a year earlier when I learned that Harriet was first and foremost a writer—a detail curiously left out of the town's mythology. When I learned that flying was her “day job,” a way to ultimately support a life of writing, my obstinacity turned just as sharply to obsession. The obsession to find her love letters. To know intimately what and whom she desired. Yes, to possess her—which can only be a desire to self-possess, to see my own reflection in this image of celebrity.

At the time of her death, in 1912, Harriet was making a hundred thousand per air show. She was that good. Or perhaps that beautiful. Upon showing her picture to my husband, Joel, he brings the article close to his face and studies it hard, and then asks me to read the entire story below, with its tiny smudged font—you need a magnifying glass to read it—detailing the aviatrix's fatal flight. So I read to him [“across the red and
purple sky”), and I read some more [“making such a beautiful curve”], and with the last word of the article, I can tell his interest, like mine, has shifted to intrigue. He too is charmed by Miss Quimby. And I am not surprised. She reminds him slightly of his first wife, Susan. The observation registers a strange mix of agreement and jealousy in me. The one he sees when he looks at the aviatrix is not me at all, but a woman gone almost five years now.

When I read of Harriet’s injuries, he is quiet. [“Nothing but a slight bruise under the left eye, and on her face was a calm, sweet expression.”] Even in death she captivates. [“There was no indication of suffering about her face, which retained its charm of expression and beauty.”]
An unknown man carries Harriet’s body from the waters of Dorchester Bay.

Officials and stretcher-bearers rush forward. Next day the air meet went on.
Setting the article down, I turn my attention back to Joel, who is humming along to his latest musical interest. “Listen to this,” he urges me. “You'll like this.” Always, there is sound to set against the driving, cooking, writing—always, the prescription for pleasure, some of which hurts to replay. While he was still married to Susan, there was a time when he ripped me disc after disc, compilations labeled in his tiny, childlike scrawl—“She Comes in Rainbows”—that I kept hidden in the cases of other, outdated albums. Albums that no one would bother opening, let alone playing and hearing the coded confession, a recognizable riff.

* 

I enrolled in Susan's workshop during my sophomore year of college. That first day of class forms a striking portrait in my mind: of Susan’s signature waist-length hair that she twisted into a knot at the nape of her neck and then untwisted, repeatedly—a mindless and graceful dance of the hands; of the red hair tie she stored on her wrist for such habits; the chime of her laugh when she excused herself for the third time to use the bathroom; the cotton tunic hugging her pregnant form.

My husband's first wife seemed oblivious or indifferent to her students' ogling, but in fact, she was very aware—deeply and insecurely aware. *People were staring at me.* There were days when she wondered aloud if she looked ugly. Joel tried to make her see—why couldn't he make her see?—nothing was further from the truth. She was beautiful in that way people called striking, dramatic, and the politically loaded *exotic.* Yes, the staring felt intrusive on this point: *What are you? Italian? Greek? Native American?*
The question chased her around the country, even in line at the grocery store on one occasion when an impatient clerk in a mostly Latino neighborhood assumed Susan didn’t speak English and uttered frustrations under his breath. Did this clerk see the color spreading across his customer’s cheeks, her chest rising and falling fast in an eruption of rage that surprised them both? I don’t know the full shape and texture of this moment, only its shadow in the stories Susan shared with her students, received as material for a lesson, like anything else.

When she didn’t show up for class halfway through the semester, we learned that she had given birth to her second son, Darius, named after the Persian emperor in honor of Susan’s Iranian heritage. (So that’s it.) Three weeks later, she returned to workshop, this time hugging not books but a bundle of baby with a crop of black hair as thick and lustrous as her own. I remember stroking Darius’s head with the lightest pressure and marveling at the odd closeness I felt to this woman and child I had just met.

*

The mind can hold many stories at once—not separated on a timeline but spied as though through a kaleidoscope, turning in a way that bits of material are reflected in an endless variety of patterns: now Harriet and Susan; now my grandparents, Ruth and Bob; now me and Joel and the prisms in between. I can see the shapes of these lives quivering in a dispersion of light stretching forward and back, enfolding us all.

*

According to my grandmother’s diary, October 19, 1940, marks her first date with Robert Smith, the man who would become my grandfather. The man I have
mythologized since I was a child. And it makes sense that I should. He was large in every sense of the word: in my mother's esteem and in her memories (he had such big hands), and quite literally in a painting the size of a ping-pong table which hung in the foyer of our farmhouse for years. My grandfather is at the center of this portrait, at the center of a trinity of men who stand on or around a tractor in the middle of a harvest, surrounded by cornstalks that seem to glint and wave in a breeze the viewer can almost feel. As a child, I studied this portrait, pressing my fingers to the paint when no one was looking. Tracing the outline of a shirt pattern, the straight bill of a hat, soft creases in the crook of an elbow. The clasp on his overalls.

Just as easily, I can picture my grandparents, Ruth and Bob, walking in the apple orchard on their first date, flush with a warm fall day. I imagine they step around fallen apples and talk about last week’s joint 4-H meeting or the dance coming up at Lake James—Are you going?—and if so, making plans to double date with a couple they will remain close to in future years, coming together for baptisms, birthdays, cross-country trips, and a tragedy that will sever one of these families—my grandparents'—in half.

But Bob and Ruth won't know that yet. For now, they are simply glad to spend the afternoon together, admiring the palette of leaves at their peak. Look at the Maple. He has her pose for a picture on her parents’ front lawn, beside a tree so crimson, it seems to burn all around her.

And perhaps Ruth's mother watches from a window framed in columns, still wearing her Sunday dress. What is she thinking as she looks out at this scene, at two
young people taking a walk, with no idea where these steps will lead? Back here, she hopes. This Smith boy, though handsome and polite, couldn’t give her only child—she looks around—all of this. She is going to college, this mother reassures herself, where she belongs. Out of reach.

* 

Harriet Quimby’s career in aviation burned bright and short, lasting only eleven months. That’s all the time it took for her to become a star, a national sensation. Men proposed to her in letters. Children requested her autograph behind the door of a bathroom stall. In some circles, women prattled about her fashions—dressing in knickerbockers—and in other circles, her involvement with stage society. It seemed she preferred the company of actresses more than Suffragists. And then there’s the suspicious matter of her unmarried status. Some theories still circulate: She did not desire men. She desired too many men. And the one that makes me sit up a little straighter: She was having a clandestine affair.

* 

Ruth did go to college and roomed with a fellow nursing major named Marge. She liked school, liked the challenge of performing new procedures (yes, even an enema), which she recorded matter-of-factly in her diary. But Ruth was homesick. She missed her parents and worried they too were lonely without her. She worried about her mother, sick in bed so often, without her only daughter to look in after her. She worried for her father, for the latest injury he might incur in the orchard, source of yet another ache, especially come fall.
And she worried that while she was gone, Bob would capture some other girl's eye. And why not? His shoulders were broad and his arms, long and sinewy, toned from years of farming. His bone structure was angular, but his features—the eyes and lips—were soft, almost femininely beautiful. The combination was striking, as was his personality: sharp-minded and sensitive, with a quick wit and an even quicker reflex to weep. And not hide it like her father did. Bob didn't go to college and he wasn't much of a writer, my grandmother admits, but he sent the funniest letters to her during their long-distance courtship—letters that I imagine she and Marge read, giggling, sitting on opposite sides of the bed. In one of them, he jokes that he'd like to own a picture of Marge, too. He loved to get a rise out of Ruth, who burned with such a beautiful blush, a color that's designed to attract, to communicate health, vitality, sexuality, and all of the other meanings blood brings to the surface. Teasing is always charged with tension—if not sexual, then with heat of a different kind. I feel it in one of my mother's earliest memories: It is late at night and she is in bed. Still awake, she listens to her parents fight in the next room, as they often do. She can make out only a few words and, occasionally, she hears Marge's name.

*

One afternoon, Susan and I ate lunch in her office. Whereas most students avoided stepping inside a professor’s work space—where the dirty business of grading and conferencing happens—Susan’s office was a magnet for students in search of some quiet counsel, feedback on a poem, or simply her company in the soft light of this space, which she filled with personal treasures: her books, of course; a sagging armchair; two
Tiffany lamps; a collection of painted rocks, presents from her two young boys. Even her perfume lingers in a book I borrowed, as traceable as any signature.

At this point, I had graduated from college and accepted Susie’s invitation—I took to using her nickname, a gesture both intimate and possessive—to join her at a small MFA program in central Georgia, where she had taken a position teaching graduate-level workshops in poetry and nonfiction. Soon we were packing our respective U-Haul trailers bound for the South and its legacy of great literature. Everything about the move was mythopoetic. I had placed Susan atop a pedestal, ascribing to her all the values and virtues of the ideal academic life. Susan was a poet, painter, and classically-trained pianist. She was The Liberal Arts embodied. During this time, I lingered in her office long after our conferences ended, sitting across from her in the blue armchair that now stands like a monument to her memory in the program’s departmental office. Her elbows rested on her knees folded beneath her. She looked casual and comfortable in something light and cotton—a summer dress?—but it was easy to feel the gravity of this conversation by the way her eyes widened and filled, her voice nearly a whisper as she recounted the story of her first child, Cyrus's birth. A story I knew well at this point but still longed to hear, as though she was narrating my own entrance to the world—and for both of them, their near-departure. Susan's voice caught at the part when Cyrus was pulled from her, not breathing. The words trailing off. I thought he was....

Later, I will wonder if she foresaw the ending—not to this story, but to another one hovering darkly over her dreams.

*
After the accident, rumors swirled that the beautiful aviatrix had suffered “an attack of vertigo.” Tempers flared on both sides: In one corner, Harriet’s supporters and fellow aviatrix friends. And in the other, those who stood by their original charge that women had no business at the controls of a machine. Harriet’s accident was proof, they argued. Surely she was overcome by excitement and fainted. This was the aviator Lincoln Beachey’s guess, a man Harriet called at one time “a serious fellow,” who never smiled and looked upon her with what must have felt like a penetrating gaze. “The Bleriot was going at nearly a 100-mile rate,” he reasoned. “This may have proved too much for Miss Quimby and she may have become weakened and unable to control her levers properly.”

Unable to control her levers. Was Beachey aware of the implication in his words? Did he know that around this time, a physician in Austria was working out a theory of the unconscious mind, its desires and drives, symbolized in our dreams, our speech and its slips? It is not hard to imagine the threat that Harriet posed to Beachey, evoking his posthumous scrutiny of her, a woman displaced in the fuselage of a plane, at the mercy of “levers” she could not wield.

Lincoln Beachey was just one voice in a crowd of several men—aviators, mechanics, reporters—who each had a theory, most of whom found fault with the unstable craft of the Bleriot (flying it was a tricky balancing act). Or with Harriet’s highairspeed. Or with the passenger who was believed to have leaned forward to whisper something in Harriet’s ear, disrupting the plane’s delicate equilibrium and sending it topsy-turvy. A. Leo Stevens, Harriet’s manager and a famous pilot himself—though
something tells me he was more than both of these titles to her—went so far as to warn Willard before the flight not to jerk around up there. I imagine him leaning over the fuselage and into Willard’s ear, maybe gripping his elbow a little too hard. He knew Willard to be an enthusiastic type, prone to “sudden impulses.” Annoyed, Willard jerked his arm free of Stevens’ grip, promising to “sit tight” for Harriet.  

How funny that in this schema, Willard is saddled with the stereotypically feminine tendency toward excitability and impulsiveness. But perhaps it is not that surprising. After all, a “willowy brunette” was about to fly a craft heavier than air, defying a basic law of nature—a feat no one dreamt possible ten years prior to that—and what’s more, she relegated a man to the passenger’s seat. From this position, no role was stable and nothing felt natural. No wonder the reaction to Harriet Quimby was mixed. Here was a woman who had overstepped her boundaries—sneaking out and dressing in drag for the early-morning flight lessons—a transgression neutralized in the eyes of the public by her alluring, thinly veiled femininity. The press nicknamed her The Dresden China Aviatrix for her beauty and daintiness.  

Can a woman be compared to porcelain—to such a precious and delicate material—and not be destined to fall? And paradoxically, is death not the only sure way this image of her won't be shattered? She will always remain this way, the still eyes in the white face/the lustre as of olives/where she stands/and the white hands.
June 9, 1944

Dear Ruth,

Drove the Dodge to Albion Barn Dance. Saw your cute cousin and chatted for some spell. Bob Bailey isn’t home yet, and she says he can’t expect her to stay in—and she has a diamond. I guess I’m “pecked,” as well. Guess I’m not kidding anyone. When I see you again we’ll have lots to “thrash out” as everyone is handing me a little dance: Do's and Don’ts. Why's and Wherefore's. But I have a mind of my own, and I tell you, you’re just too darn far away most of the time, and people don’t appreciate people unless they know them well. Some are becoming envious of you and yours. Now don’t get all fumed up—I’ll be the first one to want to see you and your “nice new coifere” (hair fix), sleek curves and lines (why boys leave home). Am I ever getting this in a jumbled up mess. You see, I could have gone to Batavia, but I didn’t and I won’t. Instead I juggled up a note or two which isn’t near as much effort as mailing a note after eight hours of nursing, I know. Cultivated corn today after a late night Thursday, so I'll close and don’t get any of this on your path till you get home, please.

Love,

Bob
I liked the way Joel rubbed Susan’s feet while they watched TV on the couch, kicking back after a day of teaching and attending departmental meetings that required me to babysit frequently for the boys. When they came home, I was asked to stick around a while, to hang out—even stay the night on a few occasions when I felt too sleepy to drive home. On nights like those, we sat in the living room watching TV and gossiping about the graduate program. Joel would have a beer in one hand and, always, Susie’s foot in the other. It’s tricky to grip and rub a foot with one hand, but Joel played offensive center in college. *Small, but strong.* Susan’s eyes closed.

“She’s exhausted,” he whispered. “But isn’t she beautiful when she sleeps?”

And she was. And *they* were, this little family who had adopted me, far away from my own. The first day of my graduate student orientation, everyone took turns, both students and faculty, introducing themselves and the story of their arrival at this MFA program. Susan explained that she came from a small college on Lake Michigan—”along with Rach, my star student.”

I shook my head modestly, but it felt good being her star, when really it was *she* whom we freely orbited around. When it was Joel’s turn to introduce himself, he said without hesitation, as though the words had been formed many times: “I’m the one who’s married to the most beautiful, talented, most wonderful woman in the world.”

For a second there was silence, followed by a few sighs and nods of the head. But I bristled. *Come on.* I thought about how this grand gesture would feel if I were Susie, and I am sure I would’ve hated it. Why? Because it felt performative? Over-the-top? Opposed to the little displays of affection I was privy to when he rubbed her feet on the
couch. Even then, he always turned the focus back on her face as she slept. Is this the point when I realized that his gestures, though obviously sweet, were also subtle tricks at self-effacement? *He is hiding behind her.* Or was he just used to being overshadowed? Susan's presence filled the room—a figure of speech, but one literalized in the wake of perfume she left wherever she went. I could always tell, entering a space, if she had just been there.

I'll bet she never won a game of hide-and-seek with the boys.

*But a mother's scent is the most heightened one to a child, anyway,* I can hear her counter. Most of all, I admired Susan's passion as a mother—the kind of mother who gave up chocolate during the two *years* she breastfed Cyrus; the kind who painted prolifically while she was pregnant and whose abstract art (its visceral shapes suggested in titles like “Breasts and Belly”) hangs now in Darius's bedroom; the kind of mother who built her boys a train station that took up one entire room of the house.

On this last point, Susie understood toys to be more than playthings to children. Toys structured their immediate world, their time, their thoughts—and in this sense, she did not equate a desire for toys with greed. “It's important to them,” she argued when a museum souvenir she had bought Cyrus broke in his clutch, and the boys and I waited in the car while she ran back to the gift shop to replace it.

But Susan had her ways of keeping the kids in check, too. One afternoon while she and I sipped tea on the deck, Darius, desperate for his mother's attention, bit her on the arm. Not an uncommon expression of jealousy and frustration, at two years old. But when he did it *again,* Susie didn't raise her voice or spank him or point to a chair in the
corner. She pushed up his sleeve and nipped him back—not hard, just enough to return the experience.

I remember he cried hard then, so great was his surprise—not at her point (it hurts, doesn't it?), but at what must've felt like a betrayal to him. Now the memory leads me to think about the child's association of the mother's body with pleasure, but back then, I am sure all I felt was some secret satisfaction on a level not altogether subconscious toward the little one who instinctively cast me as his competitor: See? She doesn't belong all to you.

Oh, but she did—to all of us, it seemed. Not even a year after their arrival in this Southern town, the family would move yet again, this time out of a rental home ridden with black mold and into a nicer one by a lake. I carried a drawer full of Susie’s bras and underwear up the stairs, blushing: “Where do you want this?”

“Just set it down on the bed,” she instructed, “where my children were conceived.” She had a quick, flirtatious wit, fueled by the listener’s split second of surprise. There was something playful and mischievous about her; she could make you melt with a mere wink or half-smile, delivered in the middle of her ribbing.

But she was also deeply spiritual, attuned to the living mysteries of the natural world and its connection to the next one. She often dreamed of turtles and believed them to be powerful talismans. Dreams were more than a function of the brain; they were media, messages to record in a journal, to meditate on in a poem. And it was this combination of the mischievous and the mystical that made Susan a mystery to people—something to behold in the eye (set down on the bed), to turn over in our minds.
Harriet Quimby was notoriously superstitious. She never flew on Sundays. And she insisted on wearing certain jewelry while she flew—charms that she picked up around the world on journalism assignments that took her to Mexico, the Bahamas, Cuba, Egypt, and the West Indies. Among these amulets was the East Indian idol *Ganesha*, whose head she literally sawed off one night when she became convinced he had turned from a good to a bad-luck charm.

But prior to this, she would affix the idol to the strut of her Bleriot before making the famous cross-Channel flight. *Ganesha* had become a kind of prop, a part of her costume. After the solo-record flight, however, he began to *behave badly* for her. (She attributed some financial woe to him, among other troubles.) She announced in an article that she “had to kill him,” and commenced in sawing off its head. And then two days before her final performance in the Third Annual Boston Air Meet, she had a change of heart and tried reattaching the idol's head to his body.

More disturbing than her superstition was the fear that her dead body would be snatched from its sepulchre and used for medical experimentation. As her will requested, she was buried in a “burglar proof copper vault.” Such paranoia is more than macabre in spirit; it seems pathological. But perhaps fame and the intense curiosity toward her—toward her exceptional beauty and unprecedented ability—made her body the ultimate object of superstition to herself.
In a Burglar-Proof Copper Vault

The satin lining’s almost completely rubbed away in the place where my hands rest. Calms me to rub the fabric between my fingers when I think I hear them coming—and they will. Did, anyway. Trailling after me into the lavatory, waiting outside the stall. They know my routes. That’s why I had to keep the soloing a secret. No spoilers, not then. It helped that I knew the inside of a newspaper office, knew their tricks and tendencies. Still, I took the backstreets to the boat. I had an easier time after we docked. L. helped me to duck the registrar with some borrowed initials, but I almost blew it signing the meal ticket for my early morning tea. Nothing but tea to drive the dampness from the bone. I thought it was just that—the cold—but it wasn’t. I can feel these things straight down into my heels. Should’ve never chopped the damned thing’s head off. Mother wouldn’t hear of it. So I went ahead and drew up the plans myself and when, by chance, she saw them—what was she doing in that drawer—only then did we sit down. And just in time. I didn’t think I’d need this tank so soon. More room, at least, than the Bleriot. Air-tight, even if I am rubbing the inside raw. No one will weigh the sum of these bones or measure the brain’s mass or do things with clamps and picks or whatever Michelangelo and da Vinci were inclined to use. Oh yes, they snatched (probably peasants) a time or two. To the great benefit of their work, some say, so why shouldn’t I be wary, too? We’re all subjects of scrutiny. I saw a skunk once slink across the length of the airfield at night (I like a solitary being), its white stripe swallowed up by the skinniest slit in the door of the dome. Somehow it fit, the spry fellow, and the best part—who would dare to follow after? Everyone studies birds and their mosaic of feathers and their fast-beating hearts. But a bird in the house is a harbinger of death. Kit found a diseased one on the Allen place and pushed it off the stoop with the toe of her boot. The fuss Daisy made when the cat finished it off. Then carried it back inside. So many little scenes, a train of quick flashes. Here they come trailing after me. What would happen, I wonder, if I opened my skirt to receive them all?
I daydream most often about my grandfather Bob, whom I will never know except through narrative. I glean what information I can from the memories spoken about him, the third child and only boy born to his parents. When Bob was seven years old, his mother died in childbirth, leaving him and his six sisters to the sole care of their father, John Smith.

Too easily I can imagine Bob at seven—around Darius’s age now—a remarkably beautiful boy, unusually sensitive and quick to show emotion, a disposition he will pass on to my mother. And she to me. Reflexively, I feel as if I know this child, now sliding his hand along the wall of his mother’s room where the bed has been stripped and the sheets replaced. Does he hide there under the covers, searching the pillow for her scent the way I did on days when I was sick or when my parents’ bed was left unmade and I could smell something slightly sweet on the sheets, something bodily and familiar to a child’s senses?

Faced with this absence, who comforts Bob? Does he learn to self-soothe in the presence of pain, or to tune it out—the way I’ve seen Darius make shapes in the condensation of a car window while Joel and I bicker in the front seat—the way my mother couldn’t, growing up, and still suffers the memories of hearing Marge's name.

John Smith is a good father but an impoverished one. Naturally, he can't care for seven children and still put food on the table. Children need a mother; they need their mother, tender-hearted, sweet Flora. No one grieves this loss more than John, who prefers to be alone, a widower, rather than remarry, a vow he keeps the rest of his life.
But what about the children? I can hear the question following him from room to room before he has even laid Flora and the stillborn child to rest. Is it out of anguish or overwhelming panic or both that John sends the smallest girls, still in diapers, to go live with two of his sisters? He arrives at a plan: Anna and Wilma will each go to an aunt for just a few years until they reach school age, when they’ll be returned to live with their father.

John learns to cope with the change by farming to the point of exhaustion so there is only work and sleep and occasionally some outdoor play if the five at home beg him long enough. And they do because they need him and because there is always the unspoken fear that he’ll give them away, too. A few years pass like this before it’s time for the youngest two to come home. The anticipation revives the household a bit with the shuffling of bedrooms and even a little shopping, a few school outfits the older girls help John pick out.

What does the actual moment of reunion look like? I try to picture the car pulling up, the call of voices, feet padding to the door. Where is Wilma? Only one aunt arrives with Anna in tow, who has figured out she is being left there for good, abandoned again, and is wailing a child’s cry of betrayal and grief. Her brother and sisters stand by silently, dumbstruck by the scene and hurting for their father.

He tries to explain. Anna was just a tot when she left. And Wilma, even younger; she doesn't know any other mother besides her aunt, a bond he can’t bear to break—not again. Not if he can help it. Seeing Anna so upset, he can't bring himself to put Wilma
through the same. He will let her go. And spend the rest of his life, I am told, regretting
the decision to send any of his children away, ever.
Harriet's mother, Ursula, knew well the special sorrow of outliving not one but four of her children. Ursula buried a son, Willie, and two daughters, Jennie and Kate, before they even reached school age. Only two daughters survived: Kittie and Harriet.

What lessons has Ursula learned by the time of her last child's birth? What experiences compel her to fashion Harriet into the kind of woman who need never rely on the allowances granted by a husband, who made a life for herself, on her own terms. The kind of woman whose independence also meant never having to leave her parents for the wedding altar. Never having to bear children. And most of all, she will never have to bear losing them.

Harriet's death, even at thirty-seven, must've felt like the cruelest blow to Ursula. Not long after, she and William divorce. William, whom she nursed back to health after the Civil War, practically supporting the family when all his attempts at farming in Michigan failed. The tune of their fights. Was it Ursula's decision to cut their losses and wrestle their lives away from the Midwest, risking death in the process, if only to avoid one more winter brushing snow off another engraved name? She has a cousin in California; does she threaten to take the girls and leave with or without William? Would he like to see her go ahead and try? And does the impulse for flight begin here for Harriet?

*

A falling human stops short when it hits the surface of the water, but its organs keep traveling for a fraction of a second longer, until they hit the wall of the body cavity,
which by that point has started to rebound. The aorta often ruptures because part of it is fixed to the body cavity . . .

In the middle of an air show, the plane carrying The Dresden China Aviatrix suddenly pitches forward. It is a long way to the water. A thousand feet. Strange to think that Harriet’s organs experience their own plummet, traveling for a fraction of a second longer than the rest of the body. And even stranger to think that while this internal plunge is slight (in centimeters? millimeters?), its force is catastrophic. Clothing and jewelry—like her lucky scarab bracelet never to be found—are ripped away at impact. But more devastating is the rupture hidden from the eye, the heart tearing away from the chest, as though on its own course.

*

On the outskirts of Milledgeville, Georgia, Joel taught me how to merge onto US-441, nicknamed suicide stretch. The ultimate test-drive. At twenty-two years old, I had traded the country’s bread basket for the Bible belt; the Great Lakes for marshes; cornfields for cotton country; flat land for hilltops that arch gracefully between wedges of longleaf pine. And perilous two-lane highways. Strip malls and fast-food joints pepper this stretch of asphalt before giving way to trailer parks and roadside stands advertising boiled peanuts (spelled “bald peanuts” on one sign) for two bucks a pint. US-441 could very well be US-31 in Holland, Michigan, or SR-20 in Angola, Indiana—like so many of the arteries that feed small towns across the country. But unlike its Midwestern cousins, US-441 careens dangerously through Georgia’s undulating forests, trying hard to buck
you off its back. A driver learns to anticipate its throws—a blind entrance around the
bend, a logging truck barreling by or, worse, out in front.

“You can’t be passive on this road,” my mentor’s husband coached me from the
passenger’s seat. We were stopped at the mouth of Coral Road, one of the many
tributaries flowing into 441. After several minutes of inching out, retreating back, inching
out again, Joel threw up his hands. “You have to make up your mind, Rach.”

But there was no break in either direction. I don't remember if I questioned what I
was doing there, in the middle of Georgia, about to turn down suicide stretch in my effort
to drop Joel off at a faculty retreat meeting. The significance of this last position wasn't
lost on me, both then and now: that of Joel's chauffer, an errand normally assigned to a
spouse—not a babysitter, not a former student. But I'm more of a family friend, I
reminded myself.

The turn signal tapped steadily.

“Just use the turning lane,” Joel repeated a little more sharply. He hardly got the
words out before I whipped the steering wheel a half-circle, throwing him back in his
seat. An approaching truck second-guessed my intention, swerving to miss me—and
still, I could not merge into traffic. We sat like this, a turtle trapped in the turning lane
for several minutes before I actually considered sliding over and letting him drive. But
the move would've required getting out of the car—not an option—or sliding over Joel,
over the lap of my mentor/friend's husband. An option, but one I relinquished to the
fantasies I already hated myself for harboring. I didn’t know why I was having them. I
loved Susan. And I was in a relationship myself, one that was physically and emotionally
consuming, maybe even controlling. I had not yet learned how to dodge the line of fire—of where I'd been, who went with me, what was said—let alone how to walk away for good, as I eventually would.

A priest once asked me, after listening to my choked confession, why I walked toward these relationships in the first place. But at the time, I didn't see it this way—a moth to the flame; a glutton for punishment. Was I depressed? Abused? Bored? None of these were right, and yet, there was a bit of the self-saboteur in me—the one laying the dynamite on the tracks and the train hurtling toward it.

At last, I pulled into the parking lot of Lake Laurel Lodge, the university's clubhouse set on a fifteen-acre lake rumored to be full of water moccasins. I had delivered Joel safely. My legs were drum-tight with adrenaline and I wondered when it would go away and why all my consciousness was centered in my thighs at that moment.

“—just need a little practice,” Joel laughed, still imparting his lesson on merging. He gathered his briefcase and gear and removed the cup of coffee pinned precariously between his knees. “Can you pick me up at four?”

* 

BIRDWOMAN AND MAN FALL TO DEATH AT FLIGHT’S END. The newspaper articles, like so many of this time period—including the ones Harriet penned—read with a sensational lilt, writing that registers a laugh one moment and a sigh the next. The diction is so dignified; the language, so lovely and nuanced. The myth of objectivity would come later in journalism; here, an individual hand guides the pen, one
sufficiently trained in the rules of style and taste. Look at the sophistication our speech has lost in a hundred years, I mutter to myself, reading. *What an art form.*

But these *belles lettres* also speak to a set of values I am less eager to mourn. “On her face was a calm, sweet expression.” It seems the writing cannot imagine vulgar suffering for its heroine. Another article is more candid about Harriet’s injuries—her broken arms and legs—but not to the extent that it is towards Willard’s: “The post-mortem examination showed that Willard had sustained a fractured skull, fractures of the spine in two places, that his chest had been crushed in, and one of his legs broken, besides other internal injuries.”

In place of Harriet’s autopsy results is a celebration of her Victorian feminine virtues: beauty, charm, serenity, sweetness. Values that commit a different kind of violence on its subject—not the stuff of a fatal fall but of slow asphyxiation atop a pedestal where there is nowhere to run and every breath is knife-sharp and tight. There is never enough air. One learns to be very still. I almost wonder if, in the moments before, Willard felt this pressure in the passenger’s seat. As one reporter observes, “A moment after she started on the downward glide and at a rather sharp angle Willard seemed to jump from the machine, although he may have pitched out over the head of Miss Quimby, who sat about three feet in front of him.”

Harriet was used to flying alone. Before Willard, only sandbags occupied the passenger’s seat. Dead weight—that’s all she needed. In 1911, she is the first woman to fly at night, to solo above the Atlantic’s dark cloth, just beyond the coast of New York. Where do her thoughts wander that night? To the upstairs bedroom her entire family
shared in northern Michigan? To the rickety wagon she helped pull in Grand Arroyo, helping to sell her mother’s herbal remedies? She had come so far. How must the cityscape have looked from that height, when below her a million women her age presented a different image, that of an alternative existence—tucking children in a single bedroom upstairs, where entire families slept in the collective sounds and smells of night. She pulls the throttle back on this thought, drifting a little further out so that the coast is but a small necklace of lights. A safe distance away. Does she dare to look down at the rush of water, at a pattern that ripples and repeats forever?

* 

I picked Joel up just as he asked, at four o'clock in the same spot where I had dropped him off earlier that day. He opened the door and slid in. The weight of his body as it hit the seat told me he was tired. I joked that this time I was going to close my eyes and gun it on 441, so he'd better be ready.

He smiled weakly. “Take your time.”

Had he had a bad day? He kept running both hands through his hair—a gesture of self-comfort, explained once after someone took notice and teased him for being vain. (Is it any wonder he suffered the nickname Captain America in college, with his blonde hair, strong jaw line, and that tightly tapered waist?) But it's not like that, I know now. It's a tactile thing, his hands in his hair. He used to have this blanket when he was a little kid, you see. The kind with the satin border that felt good to the touch: in bed, trying to fall asleep. On the couch, watching TV. At his sisters’ gymnastics meet. It was a mindless petting, something to soothe and occupy the senses while he read a book or sat and
daydreamed until another child or, worse, an adult would point it out—*how funny*—the way his tongue peeks out, almost involuntarily, pulsing slightly between his lips. He rubbed that blanket raw before his mom finally confiscated it and cut it down to a tiny impotent square missing all of its silky edges.

There were more stories like this, little asides and anecdotes swapped between us after our mutual move to Georgia—two Yankees homesick for the north, one for cornfields and the other for cranberry bogs, both for a Dunkin Donuts and, my God, a *real* bagel. But we had to admit, gas was cheap and so were the cigarettes, which somehow tasted better there because you didn't have to suck them down in the freezing cold—in fact, you didn't have to step outside at all in most of Milledgeville if you wanted to light up. And I did, often. In spite of my upbringing and better judgment, I took up the cliché of smoking in graduate school, a small transgression that Joel once shared, both of us sometimes sneaking outside for a quick drag during parties or receptions if Susie was deep at the center of a huddle. Which she was, often. So, with very little effort and much awareness, even to us, Joel and I became *friends*. Not through Susie but around her, on the fringes: sitting around the TV. The benches at school. And of course, in the front seat of the car. What's more, the conversations had turned away from small talk to heavier subjects (his grandmother was dying and he couldn't visit her; he had considered going to seminary once but couldn't decide on a denomination). A closeness that felt good and for the same reason, wrong.

Was it bothering him, too? I shut the radio off, a signal for him to talk. About anything. An idea for a lesson plan, a line or lyric that kept running through his head—
“I can't take it anymore.”

*Here we go.* But in fact, I was not ready for what he had to say, what he had never said to anyone—"living this lie that everything's great. When they haven't been, for a long time."

He meant in his marriage. And he was so tired of playing along, of pretending to be the golden couple for the whole world to see. Did I know how bad, how lonely that felt?

No. Yes. What? I was at once listening and stunned stupid. How could I hear anything through the rip in the sky—his marriage was in trouble, *possibly over*? I thought I had been spared this grief. One of the lucky ones with happy parents. Is that the way I had casted Joel and Susie—*the golden couple*—in order to neutralize my attraction and my fierce attachment to them? He was right; I didn’t want to believe it.

Didn't I? Already I was wrestling with another feeling in tension with resistance—one that had been there all along: the flattery of being the star student, favorite babysitter, family friend. And now chosen confidante. Not hers, but *his*.

He turned in his seat with a stare that searched for some recognition of truth, pleading for me to help pull him back from this awful precipice. Or to join him, it seemed. But I could only follow the double lines stretching before us—and with them, the gradual realization that I had merged onto suicide stretch without really thinking about it. Without really knowing what I was doing at all.
BEACON OF FIRES
In a manuscript found on her desk after her death, Harriet writes of the plight of the aviatrix who is lost at night and whose runway is veiled in darkness. Searching for a place to land, she scans the field for the beacon of fires of watchers on the field—for those on the ground who will illuminate a safe path. Whose fires can easily be recognized.

*

The other woman listed on the air meet’s program that bright July day in 1912 is Blanche Stuart Scott. With Harriet, she shared a love of speed, whether on the ground or in the air. But unlike Harriet, her nicknames engendered a different spirit: The daredevil woman. The tomboy of the air. (“She’s built like a pile of boulders,” Joel adds over my shoulder as I glance at Blanche’s picture, at her broad-shouldered stance beside a plane, at goggles pushed roughly up on her forehead and a scowl that says, You can both go to hell.) No, she was nothing like Harriet in looks or temperament, a shallow assessment I am ashamed to make, but I like the contrast and find myself positioning them as friends. Not good friends, but strong allies, in my mind. They liked each other. Or maybe it was something closer to respect for the good competition each woman posed to the other. I imagine even their conversations, the swapping of stories, contained some one-upmanship: Harriet, of convincing her editor at Leslie's to take a risk and print her stories on the flying lessons she carried out in disguise. Blanche, of writing to a popular car manufacturer with a similar pitch: Sponsor me in a cross-country road trip, and I'll promote the sport of driving among women, and in the process, boost your sales. Whatever the feat, their ambition is the same. To go higher, faster, farther. And to be
The Woman who started it all, who inspired all others. (‘I just wanted to be first, that's all….’)  

In this last regard, I have to wonder if Blanche didn't burn with a little envy. Blanche was actually the first to fly a plane in public, but it was Harriet, “the willowy brunette,” who earned the title of first licensed woman; first to cross the Channel; to secure her celebrity status as America's First—not Tomboy, but—Birdwoman; and finally, the first aviatrix to die a grandstand death. I can feel the list compounding and then, inevitably, reversing: She never had to out-wit Glenn Curtiss, who wedged a block of wood under the throttle in order to keep Blanche from taking off, grounding her, committing her to “grass-cutting” exercises that, with enough wind, blew Blanche's skirt up over her head. She would've quit right then—Curtiss's hope?—if she hadn't spotted the wooden block by chance while “poking around the engine,” and removed it while he wasn't looking.  

That's how Blanche came to fly: behind the back of a man. Was it this way for the Birdwoman? I can see satisfaction spreading on Blanche's face, turned now at her peer across the airfield, that satin suit—its garish purple—peeking between a crowd of suits and flashbulbs.  

Yes, Curtiss and Scott were both there that day, flying in the Third Annual Boston Air Meet. In one article, Scott witnesses the turmoil from the air and is barely able to land herself, fainting the second her feet touch ground. But in another, she shrugs her shoulders and says, ‘‘It’s terrible, but it’s what is happening every day.’ Then she [steps] into an automobile and [drives] away from the field.'
There is more to this than discrepant reporting. A double standard unfurls. The latter version reads with subtext that spits the nerve of this woman! The same judgment is spared of Harry Willard, the son of Harriet's passenger, whose reaction is also positioned very differently in print. In one version of the story, Harry “bore up with a stoicism that was wonderful.” He is most stolid here, a model of strength and reserve. Of masculinity.

But in another account, he must be restrained, as I imagine anyone would, watching a parent die. And worse, realizing that this loss inversely means his salvation. (Heads or tails?) He stands at the water’s edge, “weeping bitterly.”

*

Susan was at the height of her career when I met her. The requests for interviews and readings came pouring in almost immediately after her first book of poems—a mosaic of Iranian mysticism and personal mythos—won a major national prize. This was before 9/11 and the Patriot Act. Before Iraq. Even then, Susan’s work appealed to a national readership deeply interested in the Middle Eastern experience, which her work did more than deliver. She mesmerized audiences with the music in her voice, both on the page and in person. Eyes closed to the sound, to shapes tethered to a single word: chador, gold, pistachio, sheets. I cannot say that the experience was one of transportation as much as meditation—of being totally in the present with her—catharsis so desperately desired and, at times I felt, dangerously totemic: She is the Middle East we need. I could never tell if this loaded assignment bothered her, threatened to anesthetize or aestheticize the inherited political and personal hurts that informed her art. She answered each
question thoughtfully, accepted the compliments graciously, and only much later did I learn she was *hopping mad* at an oversight, a stereotype, some insensitivity.

Early in October during our second year in Georgia, she was asked to give a reading during a nearby Museum of Arts and Science's week-long exhibition, titled “Empire of the Sultans,” in honor of Ottoman art and Persian history. Under Susan's bio, the exhibit's program says, “She reads and lectures nationally, speaking on creative writing, world peace, and the role of art in cross-cultural understanding.”

*Creative writing, world peace, the role of art.* I wonder who drafted this tall order. Susan herself? And if so, did the diplomacy help curb her homesickness? Or on the contrary, make her feel more distanced, more displaced in America's Bible belt. All I know is she needed someone to watch the boys the day of the reading, and then the following day while she gave talks and took in some of the exhibits herself. Joel had to teach—could I do it?

I switched around some things I had scheduled, packed an overnight bag, laid out my belongings to bring (books, toothbrush, pillow), throwing in the black bikini last. Then staring at it—*I never swim in their lake*—and taking it out. But with my hand on the doorknob, I felt the impulse return—to take the boys swimming? *Yes, they might like that for a change.* Running upstairs, I threw open the top drawer of my dresser and stuffed the swimsuit in the side-pocket of my suitcase, then ran out the door, feeling it close behind me.

*
It took several more years, but eventually that first walk in 1940 through the family apple orchard produced another image taken there: that of Ruth in a wedding dress. It is April in these photos, and the war is not yet over. Ruth stands in a grove of trees, poised with her hands straight at her sides. Her hair is curled tightly. She smiles slightly—more with her eyes than her mouth. Curiously, my grandfather appears in a separate shot. Bob’s wavy hair is combed back. His suit, buttoned high on the chest.

I wonder if he cried during his vows. With six sisters and no mother and a father who labored all day—who saved his son's life once when he ran the length of a field to pull the boy from the mouth of a machine—the capacity to show emotion never left Bob, even in adulthood. My mother recalls fondly this quality in her dad: “He was a man who didn't equate crying with weakness.” Yet I wonder if this admiration isn't an attempt at self-comfort, some reassurance in the sight of a parent's tears—a father’s tears, no less, which shake a child at any age, in my experience.

But my grandfather was known to be a playful person, too, with a good sense of humor toward himself and others. During their courtship, Bob jabs lightheartedly at Ruth in his letters, especially for her status as an only child and the privilege of this position—not the least of which is a college education, a luxury John Smith simply cannot afford one of his children, let alone seven.

It makes sense, then, that Bob should be a little jealous of Ruth. But sometime into their marriage, the ribbing loses its playfulness and starts to feel resentful on both sides. Bob doesn't realize the loneliness of growing up an only child in a household with a sickly mother and a very serious, fastidious father. He doesn't know what it means
always to be attending to a mother's bedside (but not her deathbed), of having no one to
play with (to watch your sisters be given away), of retreating alone to the orchard to
climb the trees. He doesn't realize the painstaking attention paid to her dress (no money
for clothes), and the pressure to live up (you mean, marry up) to her parents' expectations.
They didn't send Ruth to college to come home and be a farmer's wife. They had saved
up, sacrificed for her—and she, in turn, sacrificed that security for passion when she
married.

Does my mother, in her child's bed, plug her ears with this last blow? Or does she
sit up, alert and frightened, the way I felt the few times I remember my parents really
fighting. My father escaping to the farm without a word, the dust flying behind his truck.
I recognize now the very passion of this exchange, an intensity that I suspect bound my
grandparents to each other perhaps even more than their four children did—even more
than the stigma of divorce in the 1940s, 50s, 60s in Protestant Midwestern America.

Still, there are moments that might be pinpointed—a breaking point—when the
shouting turns sharply to stony silence, from retaliation to deep retreat. How can the
other be reached, then? How, but to clasp and clutch, to plea and press up against the
body, its borders, its breath—to all that can still be touched.
I arrived at Susie's place just as her ride pulled up. She threw on her jacket, flinging her hair to one side, fanning me with perfume, and gathered her books. *I'm late,* she mumbled, a piece of toast clamped squarely in her mouth. And then with one hand finally free, she removed the toast, smiled, “Boys are still asleep. Help yourself to coffee, anything.” And then hollered over her shoulder, “Joel will be home at four.”

I looked around, assessed the kitchen's damage. Only a few dishes this morning, stacked haphazardly in the sink. I poured myself a cup of coffee and went to work on them. With the last dish carefully stowed away, I spun on my heels to the sound of Cyrus's gruff greeting—a voice so strangely raspy for a child, Joel used to joke that colic caused it. (*The first year of his life, I called him “the screaming puddle of poo and pee.”* 

*Susie would hit me, laughing.*)

“Good morning, Cyrus.” I hugged him, kneeling on the kitchen floor so our heads were level. His hair smelled like sleep.

“I made this for you.” He held out a necklace fashioned out of two pipe cleaners connected in the middle by a pendant of blue and yellow play-dough.

“I'll treasure it always, little man.” (My own nickname for him.) I stood up, my knees throbbing. “I thought we might go swimming today—this afternoon?”

He pointed to the window, to rain clouds any six-year-old could plainly interpret.

“Well, maybe it will clear up.” I left it at that, figuring that if the clouds parted, say, by four o'clock, I would pitch the idea again and debut the black bikini at last. I didn't think too long or hard about what, or more likely *who,* I was after. I just wanted to be seen. To be admired by a man who, more and more, appeared in dreams too good, too
dangerous to repeat. And I wouldn't have known what language to use, though certainly my body expressed its wanting in ways I could clearly feel, touch, know.

At the lake's edge later that day, beneath a sky still slick with a heavy white haze, Cyrus and Darius competed to gather the largest pile of sticks, with the older brother out-gathering the younger. Normally, poor sportsmanship would hasten Darius to pick up one of these sticks and raise it over the stooped head of Cyrus—whose thin frame and long lines already formed a stark contrast to his younger, stockier sibling—and bring it down with a snap, making Cyrus howl.

But that day, I remember peacefulness in their play, in the collaborative search for sticks that stayed sticks and not swords. The only drama that developed was in Darius's planting a foot firmly atop a hill of fire ants, sounding a chorus of screams—first from Darius, then Cyrus, who danced around his brother in total terror. I don't remember feeling panic, only the pumping of legs to the lake—of charging the water with him on my hip and continuing to wade until we were both wet up to our chests. Our breathing slowed, somehow I was able to calm Darius and coax Cyrus into the water by swinging them around and around—*motorboat, motorboat go so fast*—and to forget about the ants and the haze and the clay squishing between my toes—*motorboat, motorboat step on the gas*—when a voice rang out from the top of the hill near the house.

“Hey, look who's in the water.”

Joel was home. And he was trudging down the hill, clutching his brief case in one hand and unbuttoning his shirt with the other. With the front finally undone and untucked, I could see a copious amount of blonde chest hair peeking out through the top
of his ribbed undershirt, covering a set of pectoral muscles so big, it was hard not to stare. And when I became aware of my own staring, something in me—in the tops of my thighs, to be exact—tightened. I had never seen this much of my friend before. And he obviously wanted me to look, had shed his shirt to make the point.

Joel stood on the dock, smiling at me. “Isn't it a little cold for swimming, Rach?”

I glanced down at the fine dark hairs standing up on my arms. My skin was still tan, still softened by the summer sun, but now a spread of goose bumps rippled across my forearms, making the swimming scene, its pretense, even more of a spectacle.

“Well. Yes. But we're having fun.”

_We're having fun?_ I secretly willed Cyrus not to recount the rescue that had just taken place ten minutes before his father's arrival. Somehow he heard my prayer and redirected his dad's gaze to the debris piled tediously on the beach.

“Fun, fun,” Joel laughed, casting a sideways glance at me.

“You don't understand the amount of time and effort that took,” I countered.

“That's a serious day's work.”

“Be that as it may,” he said, “we need to get you guys cleaned up and ready to go. Susie's reading is in two hours.”

_You guys._ Did he mean all of us—as in me too?

“What do you say, Rach? Come with us.”

I know I stammered; I had a lot of work to do. I know I wanted to scamper out of the water without being seen, make a dash for my car and for the highway. Even US-441 felt instinctively safer than wherever this road might lead me. I know that I felt this, even
then. But an equal part of me was thrilled to be asked, which he seemed to know, and the more Joel pressed, the harder he made it for me to resist—\textit{you devil}—especially once the boys broke in with cheers of \textit{come with us, come with us.}

I also knew that things were not good between them—he had told me that much—and so I tried voicing the question, or some version of it, that had already formed on my tongue: \textit{What will Susie think?} Joel reassured me she'd be delighted by the surprise of my appearance at her reading. And I had no doubt that was true; I knew that none of my peers were planning on going, with the museum an hour away. But I also knew that it was one thing to show up \textit{on my own} and surprise her, and quite another to accompany her family long after my babysitting duties had ended. Something about it felt wrong, and yet I would eventually consent and hasten the boys, still jumping and tugging on my arms, up the hill and into the house.

Drawing their bath, I forgot to close the door, so that anyone climbing the steps had a clear view of the bathroom, which lay at the top of the stairs. I was not “indecent,” but I was on my knees, still in my skimpy two-piece—\textit{you devil}—bending far over the lip of the tub in order to cradle Darius's head with one hand, and with the other, rinse the shampoo from his thick mass of curls.

“I'll take over with that,” Joel offered, climbing the stairs, “and you can use our shower.” Adding quickly, “To save time.”

Again, the proposal felt inappropriate, but he was right; there was no time for me to sit around and wait for the boys to finish their baths, when it took me on average half an hour to shower and \textit{make myself presentable}—which Joel dismissed, shaking his head
in a way that I understood was a compliment. I shut the door firmly behind me this time and stood for several minutes staring at the bathroom counter lined with cosmetics and several kinds of perfume. I picked up a bottle of body splash with *Moonlight* in its name, brought it to my nose, inhaling deeply, and then set it down carefully in its place, making sure the label faced the same way. Only then did I look up at the mirror—*what are you doing?*—at a young woman I knew and didn't know, at her hair now longer and lighter, and her cheekbones, a little more pronounced than when she left Michigan.

“Like Audrey Hepburn,” Joel had flattered me once when I donned a tight black turtleneck, my hair swept up in a french twist. “That's a good look for you,” he said with Susie standing at his side. “Shows off your long neck.” Susie winked at me then, as though we shared a secret—*he likes you*—though I didn't know exactly what this unspoken recognition meant or how to feel about it. I suppose her wink meant the compliment was innocent, that it posed no threat, and that I could accept it graciously, which I did. But thereafter I became a Hepburn fan and an avid collector of cashmere turtlenecks that clung in Georgia's humidity and quickly took on a sweet, cloying scent. I eventually stopped wearing them. For a much more practical look: a black bikini in early October.

I flipped the lid of the toilet seat and sat down. In the garbage can nearby—did I really peer inside?—were wads of tissue paper, a few coils of floss, and something else that made me glance quickly away. Nothing that wasn't in my own waste basket at home. But peeking inside this one, I could no longer deny I was the voyeur in this family theater, the one sweeping her eyes over this most private space, the one peering at their
personal refuse—at what the body had touched, used up, and tossed out without so much as a thought that it might become material for study. And if I felt dirty about this, I would find no purification shimmying out of my suit and stepping beneath a stream of warm water, of standing where they stand ritually at night, in the morning, after lovemaking.

“Rachael?” A knock at the door. “I brought you a clean towel.”

I shot to my feet. “Yes, just a moment.” In my hand was a clean towel I had taken from the cupboard beneath the sink. I dropped it in the corner, yanked on my suit, and opened the door.

“Sorry, I just thought. Here.” He held out the bundle. I took it and we laughed a little, and in that second I felt each of us stalling, waiting—for what? What did I hope might happen in their bedroom, with the boys—where? In the hallway. I could hear them tearing down the hallway, no doubt naked and swinging their own towels in the air.

*

I am told that my Uncle Doug, on the verge of divorce just two years into his marriage, took off on a cross-country trip with his best friend Scott Anderson. The perfect prescription for a couple of guys still in their twenties and totally lost, one lovesick, the other looking for some kind of direction. They drove to California, Scott said. “Just took off.” Doug had a fairly new car and a lot of motivation to get away, to clear his head and see an emblematic part of the country Americans have gravitated toward since its conception, a place decidedly wild and at once serene. Out West, Doug and Scott spent
several days in Anaheim—even stopping at Disneyland, a simulated form of escape—and then traveled five hours east to Arizona.

There, Doug did a strange thing. He left Scott to meet up with Beth, Doug's soon-to-be-ex, at a little resort, “a health spa thing” in Phoenix. Doug and Beth rendezvoused there for a few days. A second honeymoon? A last-ditch attempt at reconciliation? Scott doesn't think so. (Three days, then, of desperately sad break-up sex?)

After those few dolorous days and nights, Beth would return to Michigan alone, and Doug would resume the escapade with his best friend. The two stopped at Vegas, that beacon of fires blazing in the distance, at once blaring *I am alone* and *I am not alone*—blowing wads of cash on chips and booze and girls and more booze—before heading home to all that awaited. And all that was gone.
Susie met us at the entrance of the museum. If she was dismayed or disturbed to see me, she certainly hid it well, wrapping one arm around my shoulders and squeezing me to her. I remember this moment, in fact, as one of the happiest times I would see her, as she introduced her two boys, *the lights of her life*, to all the Persian artists and scholars she had met that day. The exhibition, it seemed, proved a good experience after all. Following her reading, whirling dervishes danced on stage, and Joel took turns hoisting each boy on his shoulders so they could see the white flumes twist and turn to music trilling in a haunting, minor key. I was spellbound by the circular movement, by the incessant spin of skirts and palms upturned. Reading my gaze, Susie whispered the meaning of this movement—*a deep trance*—as one inspired by Rumi, who is said to have danced in rapture after meeting a holy man, spinning as a planet does around the sun—*conquering dizziness*—and uttering the name of God.

*  

Back in my apartment that same weekend, I received a call late at night. I almost didn't pick up; the number that flashed across the *Caller ID* screen drew a blank in me. “Hello?”

“Hey, it's Joel.” He was calling from his office at school, just a few blocks down the street. Could he stop by? He needed to talk. His voice was strained, tired.

I said *sure*. I said *come on over*. As soon as we hung up, I flew into the bedroom and threw off my over-sized t-shirt. The trick was not to look as if I had changed my clothes, but to appear casual and natural—just another Sunday night. I reached for a tight tank top and black Lycra yoga pants. Yoga at 10:00 at night? *Whatever.* I loved the way
these pants felt, like the drape of satin sheets across the skin. And sheets were very much on my mind. I unhooked and fed my bra through the armholes of my top, flinging it on the floor of my closet. But this looked desperate—and worse, whorish—so I tried putting it back on without taking my shirt off, just as the knock at the door came. *Shit.* I threw the bra down and grabbed a cardigan, dressing as I skipped downstairs.

“Hey,” I breathed, letting him in.

He entered quickly and followed me upstairs, making small talk, asking offhandedly if my roommate—a peer in the writing program and a notorious night-owl—were at home.

“She's not,” I said, unsure of how to feel about this fact. “But I never know when she's coming and going.” Which was true. “Do you want a beer?”

He would love a beer; I had *read his mind.* And still, neither of us knew what the other was thinking, or what to say, once I had handed him the bottle and sat down on the couch, my legs folded beneath me.

“So.”

“Here we are.”

I am ashamed to admit the script here did not deviate too far from similar scenarios on TV—in which the couples lunge at each other mid-sentence—though there was the preliminary gripping of hands and the imploring question, “What's happening here?” Neither of us knew, but *we wanted* and *we wanted* until there was no more point in saying it.
The kissing was different than I had imagined. More than anything, I found myself responding to his smell. Not his breath—which was good, crisp with the first wash of beer—but of his skin. Not cologne, but a scent more virile and musky. Not sweat, either, but something along those lines. Whatever it is, Joel exudes it—and me to him. A walking pheromone factory, we tease each other.

Years ago, late at night, I happened upon one of those investigative reportage shows that featured a study conducted on pheromones—specifically, on our responses to them. A woman was asked to sniff several mason jars, each containing a white cotton t-shirt. The shirts had been worn individually by a random selection of men, none of whom the woman knew. Sniffing the jars, she was asked to select the one that smelled “best” to her. A scientist then analyzed this winner's genetic makeup alongside the woman's, and found that, of the entire group, his DNA matched up best with hers.

“We fit together.” Joel pulled me onto his lap. “If we had time,” he said, breathing into my hair, “I could show you how well.” He slid his hands up and down the Lycra pants. I pressed mine against his chest, against those perfectly molded pecs, poking them, teasing him: “So they're real.”

“Do you remember when you first put your hand on my chest?” I did not but feigned remembering anyway, kissing his neck. “You went in for a hug once and lost your balance. You put your hand right here, just for a second, to catch yourself.” Kissing him lower—right here?—he moaned. “I haven't felt a jolt like that—well, ever.”

And what did I feel? Somewhere deep, from the torso down, I was still flinching, not from disgust but from fear. This makes sense now when I read that flinching implies
a failure to endure pain or face something dangerous or frightening with resolution.\textsuperscript{20}

This intimacy was fraught with danger and definitely pain; what resolution could possibly come from it? We had crossed a threshold, transgressed a boundary—not just one, but many: his marriage; my own relationship at the time (though it was long-distance and deceitful on both ends—yet more failure to endure and face pain); and the violation that frightened me most, my betrayal of Susie.

At this last recognition, I felt the edges of an anguish that no amount of pleasure could defer, and yet this dread made me clutch and cling to Joel all the more, breaking away only from paranoia at my roommate's return. There would be no lovemaking then, we both understood. It was better that way. If we were going to do this thing, we wanted to savor it. We wanted it to be good, and we knew that it would be. We made plans.

* 

After his divorce, my uncle Doug took flying lessons. The road trip had stirred something in him, roused an earlier self he had missed since becoming a husband, a farmer, and a family business partner. Beth never adjusted to this lifestyle. More than that, she discovered she did not want it—the constant chores, morning and night; financial strain; the house she couldn't keep clean for all the mud and the dust; and most of all, the long days she spent in it alone.

Doug and Beth lived in the white-columned centennial house in which my grandmother Ruth spent her childhood. To hear her recall the grandeur of this house—\textit{it was really something}—my wonder at Beth's unhappiness quickly leads to scorn. But I have come to believe, against the family's collective attitude toward her, that she did love
Doug and Beth's separation was devastating, I'm told, to the entire family. To a mother and father who stayed and railed against each other for more than thirty years. I can only imagine how much their son's divorce hurt. How they held themselves partly responsible, as parents are wont to do. How they grieved for him. Empathized with him. And to some degree, envied and resented his decision.

* 

I met Joel in an empty office kitchen at 11:30 at night. Again, I wore the Yoga pants that pulled easily down past the hips and over shoes, though it looked ridiculous—nude, in shoes—and I laughed because I was nervous, and because I didn't know what to do with my body in this space of storage and office supplies. This was the place where we would “savor” each touch? Steal time?

There was none. Shortly before this rendezvous, Susie had announced to the entire program—and to me in private, her voice light, mellifluous over the phone—that she and Joel had accepted Fulbright scholarships to teach the remainder of the year, from January to June, at the University of Jordan. The entire family was moving again—just for one semester, just six months—to another country, another continent.

I received this news with a blank stare and the observation that I was almost out of cigarettes. Hours later came the anger, hot and bitter at Joel. How can you both leave? I followed you here. My face in my hands: I followed you.
And finally, the fear. *You're going to end up one of those hostages.* The laughter that trailed was much too hard. The kind that shifts seamlessly to weeping. *Meet me,* he pleaded. He had to see me, if only for a minute. He had to be in the same room—to look at me, to hold me. I said I couldn't. I was working at school. It was late. *I'm coming over, anyway.*

He bent down and untied the laces for me, lifted my feet free, then grazed his cheek across my knees, kissing and climbing his way up. I closed my eyes. How could it be like this ever again? And how could it be any different? He *couldn't stand it,* without me. I *couldn't look at her,* after being with him. And worst of all, it was getting harder to be near the boys. Their laughter, hers; their eyes, her eyes. Joel and I began to drive far away from school, from town, to clearings marked with *no trespassing.* Everywhere a sign to ignore, a plea for more, *just once more.* But there was nowhere left to go.
The things we won’t name

and why we refuse to name them. Followers of early Judaism feared the wrath they might invite if they named God. Instead of choosing one name, they settled on seven and avoided writing down Our L-rd, defacing G-d on paper. Without a name, a thing stays in the realm of the ineffable, safe from the symbolic, from speech. From sin.

I remember fluorescent lighting and the kitchenette’s cold countertop. We could barely see each other, stumbling out of our shoes. I remember that he didn’t bother untying the laces (still doesn’t). I remember damp curls matted to his forehead, touching his head to mine. And that first touch, when I lost my balance going in for a hug hello and tried to play it off as if I meant to press my hand into his chest, right here. He shows me, the memory-touch burned into him.

Not long after that, he’s out-of-breath crying, and we walk block after block to get it back. I listen, not crying, not knowing what the hell I am doing—thinking more about what I am not doing, so that when it comes time to defend myself, I’ll be ready; I’ll curl into this negative space of not doing anything with a man I’m not supposed to desire. Instead, the many anythings took shape in my sleep, the mind-over-body daydreaming late into the morning with the sun on the sheets, warming my legs sprawled in the same pose I’ve assumed since I was little: on my stomach, one knee bent, hands tucked in, and yes, sometimes slipping down past the hips. Some of my earliest memories are of my own touch, a confession I once shared with a group of friends who raised their eyebrows and laughed at my asking, is that normal, do you remember anything like that, when touch meets the body’s edges—shoulder, knee, chin, heel—how the eyes close.

Pleasure likes a precipice.

There, in the dark kitchenette, sitting on a countertop and staring at the top of his blonde head. There, right before he left the country for a place where prayers are uttered and God is named over a loudspeaker—Allah alim, Insha’llah—turning our will over, folding our bodies.

I tried pulling away once. We were fighting, so desperately frustrated, and he flattened his palm on the driver’s side window, cried out for me to roll it down, please. Bugs swirled in the headlight’s beam, casting a single path in the dark.

I put the car in park.
A few days after our “last time,” I answered the door in my bathrobe, annoyed. Not something I typically did—it was becoming a theme—but the voice on the other side of the door sounded desperate. Like my grandfather Bob, Joel is a man who cries openly, and at times I’ve been the comforter of this crying; at times, the catalyst. I opened the door annoyed, ushering him in quickly: “What is it?”

Did I really ask this question? Didn’t I already know the answer? But all that I could think about in this moment was the work of his hands untying the knot at my waist, pulling me toward him, not looking—just holding my bare body against his clothed one. Relaxing a little, I returned the hug, holding him tightly around the waist. The pressure broke loose a sob into the crook of my neck, a loud, gasping cry that shook us both. I will never forget the sound. I recognize it now as the despair of one who cannot remain like this, hinged in a doorway, yet cannot leave.

“Come with us,” Susie said, only half-teasing, when she announced their plans to me. Her spirits were high; she was finally going “home” to a part of the world that resonated deeply with her. She wanted this for her boys too; for the first time, they would get to play alongside other children who resembled them, with their fair skin and dark, round eyes. And it was relatively safe—safer than people assumed. She ended her pitch with, “You could be the boys’ tutor in the mornings, write all afternoon.” And then with a sigh that was almost wistful, as though she were talking only to herself: “Just think what it would do for your writing.”

When I said that “I can’t, I’m sorry,” she said she knows, she knows. Did she? We hugged goodbye—it’s not forever—but I knew it was. I had come to a decision.
When they finally left, Susan with her family, with Joel, I felt a profound sadness that threatened to send me to bed for days. But what hurt the most, the pain I kept to myself, was the even greater sense of relief I felt.

*

I have a glimpse of another parting, this time in 1976. Ruth was middle-aged by then, the mother of four grown children. Her husband and two sons were about to board a plane bound for Minnesota. September has a way of feeling slightly feverish, when sweat meets the first shiver of fall—but not in Mankato, they bet. They could all use a respite, a reason to depart the hot cab of a combine and climb into the cockpit of a Beechcraft, leaving it all behind for a few days. *For business or pleasure?* It’s hard to say what propelled these men to attend a farm show so far away and so ill-timed, in the middle of harvest—except to say flatly the desire is an American one: the drive to get ahead, to secure for oneself some form of better living via better technology, better inventions. And in the process, a re-imagined self.

Plus, the trip was a tradition, and I think the men must've relished the excuse to leave the homestead, the root of their hard-earned success. *A labor of love,* as the saying goes. Ruth had her own saying cross-stitched and hanging on the wall: *As I chose him, I chose this land, this life/ And always knew that as his wife/ Midst labors never done/ By love we three were wed/ We and the land are One.*

But Ruth’s husband and sons did not always share the same vision or act as three in the name of One, as it goes sometimes with families in business. The same friend who drove out to California and back with Ruth's son phrases the problem like this: *Sons want
to move forward and do some aggressive things, and dads, you know, they’ve worked hard to get where they are, and they don’t want to move too fast. The more the father stands firm, the more the sons push back. But they have reached an agreement on this: to go and have a look around at what inventions might increase their yields, ease their labor, improve their moods. It’s remarkable, this progress in a profession as old as humanity. And maybe they head back home with a renewed sense of purpose and place in the midst of it all. They board the plane on the cusp of evening, judging they’d be home by nightfall.

*  

Another Sunday night. Another knock on the door. Eight weeks had passed since Joel and Susan had left for Jordan. And with them gone, I found my focus again. I needed this distraction, this distance from them; without it, I couldn’t sit still, couldn’t sustain a train of thought long enough to see it through, and it was hurting my other relationships (Are you losing weight? And from my boyfriend, If you’re cheating on me, I’ll find out), not to mention my writing. That night, I sat in my apartment, struggling to finish the final essay in my thesis—about a family tragedy, a flight gone wrong—when Marty, my program director, showed up.

At the sound of his knock, a heavy drumming, my roommate and I turned to each other. She wouldn’t go to the door. She knew it was bad.

So I let Marty in. I invited him to sit down. His eyes were rimmed in red, his hands tightly clasped. I remember this moment as stretching on forever: his search for the words, for the right way to tell us that he had gotten a phone call from Jordan earlier
that night and—"this is hard"—he had some sad news to share with us, though he looked
straight at me.  "There was an accident.  A car accident."

    My voice was steady.  I heard it say a name.

    "No. It's Susan."

    My roommate began to cry.  She rose from the couch to sit at my feet, resting her
head on my knee.  She knew nothing of my secret.  No one did.

    "And Cyrus. Both of them."

    I went for a walk.  Up and down the blocks I walked. To the Governor's mansion.

*I'm sorry.*  Library.  *I'm sorry.*  Run-down theatre.  *I'm sorry.*  Pool hall.  *I'm sorry.*  All
over town, I whimpered and I walked.
AMMAN, Jordan — A weekend traffic accident in southern Jordan that killed a 6-year-old American boy also killed his New York-born mother, a Jordan-based educational exchange program said Monday.

Cyrus Atefat-Peckham, 6, and his mother, Susan Atefat Peckham, 33, died instantly in the accident Saturday night near Ghor Safi, 75 miles southwest of the capital of Amman, said the Jordanian-American Commission for Educational Exchange, known as Fulbright.

Cyrus's father, Joel, of Milledgeville, GA, was hospitalized in critical condition, according to the statement from Fulbright, which administers the Fulbright scholars program.

On Sunday, the Jordanian Civil Defense had said an American child and a Jordanian translator had been killed in the accident. The agency had not identified the child or mentioned his mother's death.

Joel Peckham is an English-language professor who was assigned to teach at the University of Jordan this year, the Fulbright statement said. His wife, a native of New York City, also was a Fulbright scholar teaching poetry, creative writing, and English at the university, it said.

The Peckhams, who arrived in Jordan two months ago, were touring southern Jordan when their vehicle struck a truck, the statement said.

An unidentified Jordanian friend and a family tutor who was with the Peckhams was killed, according to the statement.
On Saturday, February 21—exactly two weeks after the accident—I received this note: *This is Rhian, a friend of Joel’s. He wanted me to send you a special email to check up on how you are doing. He is very worried about you and sends his heart out to you. I’ve been beside him constantly and he speaks of you so highly with the kindest words. He wanted me to send you his love, comfort, and let you know that the thought of you has kept him strong throughout this tragedy.*

At the end of the note was a phone number many digits long. I decided I would call the next day, on Sunday, from the departmental office. I wanted to make the phone call in privacy and told my roommate I was going to the store. She frowned at me. “Can I go with you?” For two weeks she had kept a careful watch over me, eyeing me as I ate, distracting me with movies, television shows, smoke-filled pool halls. And I was grateful. But I needed to be alone now. Rhian’s note had shaken me from a sleepwalk. From a strange and comfortable shock. And I would have been content to remain in this state, with my terrible tragic guilt, and avoid calling him one more day if her note hadn’t made me feel guilty for that too. More than that, I didn't know how to feel about Joel's compassionate worry for *me*. I felt unworthy of his comfort—of anyone's comfort—and simultaneously jealous of Rhian for comforting him, *beside him constantly*.

Most of all, I felt confused.

I had made up my mind to walk away from both Joel and Susan. I saw no other way. I couldn’t be with him, even if they divorced, and face her. And I couldn’t continue seeing him, even if she never found out, and face myself. I wanted out. It was the only resolution, the only way to avoid facing either of those ends. The cruel irony is
that with the accident, I was spared this “resolution.” I was allowed to have it both ways: the chance to be with Joel, without having to confront Susan. But the resolution of this impossible situation was itself horrific, unimaginable. One source of agony had simply replaced another.

I dialed the number. When at last his voice answered, it was like pulling a net up from the bottom of the ocean. His voice sounded water-logged, thick with drugs. Yet he was able to express with fervor what I could not: *How I feel about you hasn’t changed. You need to know that, no matter what.*

We hung up and I sat for a long time thinking, alone in a departmental office with the lights off, just as they were that night he and I ducked into the adjoining kitchen. And now he had lost his wife and oldest child—half of his family. How could he feel anything about me after that? And what did I feel toward him, now?

When I returned to the apartment, my roommate nodded at my hands stuffed deep in my coat pocket. “You didn't buy anything?” That frown again.

“There was nothing I wanted,” I lied.

* 

The day that Harriet died, a woman reporter named Gertrude Stevenson was to be her next passenger after Willard. In fact, she was slated to go first, but Willard, the air meet's manager, cut in line.

So Gerturde waited and watched. “I'll be back in twenty minutes to get you,” Harriet had promised. It would be the last sentence Harriet would utter “besides a few directions to her mechanician.” 22
Gertrude was secretly fine with going second. She was nervous about the flight, so much so that at several moments she considered backing out. But Harriet, a fellow writer, convinced her it would make for good copy, “the distinction of being the first woman passenger to fly with a woman pilot.”

From one writer to another, Harriet appealed to Gertrude's ambition and flattered her by conflating their positions—the passenger with the pilot. Not surprisingly, then, Gertrude can't help recognizing the irony of this deferral, of this “narrow escape from death.” It would feel to her more like a “dream” than a happening, the “shouts and screams” and repeated remarks from “practically every man using the identical words, ’Just thank God that you're alive that's all. You'll never come any nearer death and get out of it.”

These same men had joked earlier that there wasn't enough money in the world to hire them as the aviatrix's next passenger—she has a devil of a nerve—but several women vocalized their eagerness, crowding around Gertrude and congratulating her on securing this lucky spot.

Before the air meet kicked off, Harriet coached Gertrude. “You'll have to keep still in the machine. I don't suppose you'll want to move around very much.” Gertrude agreed to follow this simple instruction and to tie the veil around her bonnet “good and tight.” There's a strong wind up there, Harriet noted, and “if your bonnet isn't tied on tight you'll lose it.”

It was easy to miss the aviatrix's instruction and be swept up instead in gazing at her, as Gertrude would later admit. But it was the combination of her beauty and
something else that bewitched the woman reporter. “Her expressive, intelligent grey eyes just commanded confidence. Her rather large, generous mouth bespoke nerve and determination.”

Yes, this would make for good writing; she was certain of it. She pushed aside her bad feeling: *On the whole I wanted a trip. Other people had gone up and come down all right, and not for worlds would I show the white feather. If all that feeling was premonition and foreboding, I didn't know it at the time. I thought it was merely the perfectly natural fear that any person would have in attempting the mysterious and the unknown.*
NTSB Identification: CHI76AC091
14 CFR Part 91 General Aviation
Event occurred Thursday, September 16, 1976 in COLDWATER, MI
Aircraft: BEECH D55, registration: N8330N

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| TIME | N8330N | PX | 500 | PLEASURE/PERSONAL TRANSP TOTAL HOURS, 400 IN TYPE, DAMAGE-DESTROYED OT-000 | INSTRUMENT RATED. |

DEPARTURE POINT
MANKATO, MN

TYPE OF ACCIDENT
COLLISION WITH GROUND/WATER: UNCONTROLLED

PHASE OF OPERATION
LANDING: INITIAL APPROACH

PROBABLE CAUSE(S)
PILOT IN COMMAND - SPATIAL DISORIENTATION

FACTOR(S)
WEATHER - LOW CEILING
WEATHER - RAIN

WEATHER BRIEFING - BRIEFED BY FLIGHT SERVICE PERSONNEL, BY PHONE
WEATHER FORECAST - FORECAST SUBSTANTIALLY CORRECT

SKY CONDITION
CEILING AT ACCIDENT SITE

BROKEN 1100

VISIBILITY AT ACCIDENT SITE
5 OR OVER (UNLIMITED)

PRECIPITATION AT ACCIDENT SITE
RAIN

OBSTRUCTIONS TO VISION AT ACCIDENT SITE
TEMPERATURE-F

HAZE 69

WIND DIRECTION-DEGREES
30

WIND VELOCITY-KNOTS
12

TYPE OF WEATHER CONDITIONS
IFR

TYPE OF FLIGHT PLAN
IFR

REMARKS- BATTLECREEK WX, WITNESSES REPORTED LOW OVERCAST CLOUDS, MISTING RAIN.
In 1915 Walter Cannon first described the *fight-or-flight response*, based on two reactions to danger that he had observed in animals: to stay and fight, or to flee the scene. These responses, he said, are automatic—wired into our central nervous systems. Since Canon's time, researchers have identified a third automatic response: to freeze, a phenomenon also known as *hypervigilance*. In this state, the subject is acutely alert, on guard, and watchful. (And for good reason, since carnivores detect movement first.)

But for humans, freezing in response to danger can prove fatal—a failure to act and save oneself. Researchers have found this to be especially true in studying survival trends in commercial plane crashes. In these situations, the response to freeze must itself be fought. And those who can do this successfully, it's been suggested, tend to visualize themselves in such scenarios—to have already played it out in the mind.

*I*

I hate to fly. I know the statistics; I know that my chances of dying are five hundred times greater in a car than in a plane. Even so, when I sit down in my window seat overlooking the wing—I feel panicky when I can't see the wing—the favorable odds of not dying in a plane feel significantly diminished alongside the other calculations hijacking my thoughts. Looking around, I can't help assessing the great weight of the plane's bulk, the speed of our taxiing, the angle of approach, and always, the weather. I don't presume to know anything about the physics or mechanics of flight. What I know is this: *Should* there be a problem mid-air, there is a strong chance—more than .005%—it will prove fatal for all on board. My family history proves it's more than possible. It
happened. A reality that both grounds my fear and launches fantasies so fatalistic, there is terror in the slightest turbulence, panic at the patter of rain obscuring my view of the wing.

Part of the problem is my overactive imagination, or so I was told in childhood. I remember certain daydreams as well as I remember any experience, actually lived—in fact, I believe I remember them better. I dreamt best in transit, usually on the way to piano lessons or church or on the bus ride home from school. I was the second-to-last stop on a very long rural route; what else was I to do at age six, seven, fourteen? Most of the time, I was a ballerina performing a very difficult choreography never before mastered by a child. In reality, I quit ballet at age six, not even a full year after starting, because it interfered with my Saturday morning cartoons and my poor mother didn't have the energy to do battle over it, with four kids to care for and a farmer-husband to feed. Cartoons triumphed that day, but I would never give up my middle-child dream of dance, choreographing my own “dramatic movements” in the living room while my older sister video-taped—back when camcorders weighed as much as a suitcase—and I moved and mouthed bad lyrics to her favorite 80's pop songs.

Other times I dreamt I was a musical prodigy at the piano or violin—I had a thing for classical—knowing full well nothing would win back my mother's good graces after the ballet debacle more than performing a difficult sonatina never before mastered by a child. In reality, I never practiced the piano and, in fact, couldn't read a lick of music until age twelve, when my piano teacher, Doris King, sat me down and, setting her hand-held dry-erase board in her lap, said in slow syllables I'd have to get another teacher. She
had done all she could with me. With the lesson over, I gasped quietly in the bathroom in a scene dramatic as any daydream, hating her and wanting her back all at once as if I'd been dumped—which I had been, essentially. And I adored Doris—oh, Doris, how could she quit me?

After a while the thoughts turned to my mother: a music teacher herself with four kids and a farmer-father to feed. And I couldn't bear to disappoint her again, a guilt my siblings never seemed to share when it came to piano lessons; they were basketball stars up through college. So I made a promise to myself that day, staring into the bathroom mirror and vowing to prove Oh, Doris wrong. I would learn to read the musical notes on her dry-erase board. And I did. Not at prodigy level, but well and often enough to drive my siblings outdoors to the basketball barn—no wonder they were so good—and yes, we had an entire barn devoted purely to the practice of basketball. We lived on a large hog farm, complete with a white fence that I painted to earn some extra cash one summer. There were two farm dogs that occasionally got run over and were revived by the Grace of their own resilient spirits and, no doubt, of that super-clean saliva dogs are supposed to have.

Compared to childhood daydreams, my adolescence imagination is less virtuoso in stature and more concerned with the curiosities occupying my immediate space—that is, the business of sex and death. The Facts of Life—beloved TV show aside—were taught to me in two separate spheres: in the home, as my mother read to us out of a cartoonish ‘70s book called Where Did I Come From? And on the farm, when my dad would occasionally recruit some help moving a dead sow out of a barn. He came and got
us out of the pool once, my cousins and me. We put on our flip-flops. Our suits dripped a spotted line in the dust, mixing pool water with sludge that collected beneath the slatted floors, and my dad would coach us, *On the count of three*, and we'd pull with all our might tug-of-war style on a rope tied to the hind leg of the sow, afterbirth trailing in a web of stringy glue still attached to her. Sometimes we’d get the giggles, wishing aloud for a free hand to plug the nose. The whole thing was a spectacle, an absurd scenario with the tug-of-war and *God, the stench* and the froth that gathered around the sow’s jowls—*pneumonia*, he explained—and the line of green shit leaking out of her ass.

For the most part, it was a happy and peaceful existence, punctuated by the seasons and their respective harvests, which we canned in Mason jars that lined the steps of the cellar: so much sweet corn, sloppily hulled strawberries, and my favorite, peaches with their fleshy orbs stripped of skin—the skinning possible only when the peaches were at their peak ripeness, spread out on newspaper on the basement floor because it’s cool and dark down there and there’s something about the newspaper that makes them ripen-up sweet as death.
In the Dark

*She shared that part of her interest is due to a history of flying and writing in her family.* – Roland Stoy, “Grad Student Does Dissertation on Quimby”

As kids, we played mostly in basements. At our farmhouse. At our piano teacher’s place in town. Even at church functions, when the grown-ups would usher us downstairs in what felt like a dank, dimly lit sepulcher filled with—what? My cousins and I never ventured far from the base of the stairs to find out. An old church basement is especially scary, no matter how fervently it’s dressed up and reimagined. This one sported a pool table. And some suspicious-looking couches, “gently used” donations from former parishioners in the late 70s, I imagine. It’s not very original to say that basements are creepy spaces. Like a building’s pocket, where things are kept from sight, stored for later, stuffed with discarded scraps that might become useful in the unforeseen future. But, also, a place we seek for safety in the storm—as we did one summer during a touring-choir’s nighttime performance. With the electricity out, how fun it can almost feel, being thrown together in the intimacy of a dark space. The shelter becomes a sepulcher once again, this time of secrets and speculations. The shared pleasure of being scared. Even without the storm, with the electricity fully on, my cousins and I loved to play the game of What Happened? The most popular theory was that, somehow, the plane’s exhaust system had failed, maybe backfired. (We were old enough to know about carbon monoxide.) They fell asleep, all of them. My grandfather and both uncles and, of course, the pilot. We knew it to be *his* fault, but we ruled it an easy mistake. The forgotten flip of a switch and—poof.

That quietly, asleep.

Their names uttered only in the whisper of a dream: Robert. Douglas. Dean.
“Six Area Men Die in Crash: Twin-Engine Plane Crashes Near Quincy”

By Bud Barnes-Staff writer
Published: Friday, September 17, 1976

QUINCY—Six Coldwater area men were killed shortly before 9:30 p.m. Thursday in the crash of a twin-engine plane in a cornfield on a farm about five miles northwest of here in Butler-twp.

The victims were identified as Clifford Hadley, 53, of 13191 Shore-dr, Iyopawa Island, who was reportedly the owner and pilot of the plane; Robert Smith, 54, of 480 River-rd and two of his sons, Dean, 18, also of 480 River-rd, and Douglas, 28, of 260 South Angola-rd; James Novak, 43, of 11 Bater-rd; and James Troyer, 22, of 681 Wood Lane, Rose Lake.

Smith was a prominent farmer and former Branch County Commissioner. Hadley was the owner of Hadley Farm Equipment of 816 East Chicago-st.

Funeral arrangements for Troyer are being handled by Putnam Funeral Home of Coldwater. Arrangements for the other victims had not been announced as of this morning.

The victims were returning from a business trip to Minnesota. They had left Coldwater Thursday.

Hadley's body was reportedly pinned in the wreckage at the controls of the craft.

The bodies of the other victims were found in the cornfield, “dismembered something terrible,” said Dr. N. J. Walton, Branch County Medical Examiner, who arrived at the scene at about 10:30 p.m.

“It was gruesome and one victim identified only through a wedding ring he was wearing,” said Walton. “The plane was demolished beyond recognition.”

The plane apparently nosedived into the ground from an undetermined height and, on impact, flipped over.

The crash was reported by Mrs. Rex (Judy) Beemer of 868 Williams-rd. The crash site was on the Beemer farm, about 200 yards north of the road, which runs east and west.

Her husband had left to go fishing in Northern Michigan on Thursday and had not yet returned home, she said.
She said she had just gone into the living room to watch the television when she heard the sound of an engine of a low-flying airplane.

“It sounded like it was going to come into the house,” she said. She added that the plane came over the house a second time and appeared to be headed toward the south east when it crashed.

She said she turned off the lights in the living room when the plane struck the ground because she thought she could see the cornfield more easily if the room was dark.

There was no fire or explosion, she added. She said she counted to 10 and then telephoned the Tekonsha State Police Post. Police were at the scene within minutes.

Mrs. Charles Locke, 40, of 899 Bidwell-rd, about a half-mile north of the Beemer farm, reported that she also heard the sound of the plane's engine. She described the crash as a dull thud. Mrs. Locke is a former airline stewardess and said the engine emitted a peculiar whining sound, with low and high pitches. The sound was similar to that of an engine of a plane being piloted by an inexperienced operator.

Hadley, however, was reported to be a seasoned pilot and was thoroughly familiar with the twin-engine Beechcraft.

Mrs. Harold (Jeane) Talant, of 768 Quincy-Grange-rd, said she also heard the plane and added that she thought the engine sounded as if the craft was trying to gain altitude.

Officers of the Tekonsha State Police Post and a Branch County Sheriff's deputy remained at the scene of the crash this morning, pending the arrival of officials of the Federal Aviation Administration later in the day.

Also at the scene several hours were a pumper unit and several members of the Quincy Fire Department.

A rescue unit of the Coldwater Fire Department was called upon to help extricate the body of the pilot, Hadley, from the wreckage.
The severance I imagine is excruciating, horrific, even though I tell myself they didn't feel a thing. Too quick. I need to believe this, need for the story to be one of sleep, of carbon monoxide: odorless, colorless, and, most of all, painless.

It works, for a while. But it doesn't quiet the need to know what happened, and where it all went wrong, when everything should've gone on like it always does. Planes always make it to places. They just do—by magical laws of physics and engineering and fervent prayer to the saints. My younger brother, Jonathan, flies with Saint Christopher around his neck. Harriet flew with the elephant-faced Ganesha. What superstitions did Clifford Hadley entertain? What supplications did he make and to whom, and, for God's sake, what was he thinking before the plane pitched and he was pinned against the controls of a machine he had no business controlling—yes, there is anger, hot and high-pitched—"piloted by an inexperienced operator."

Mrs. Charles Locke gave voice to it. And Mrs. Rex Beemer and Mrs. Harold Talant. All three neighbors heard the plane's distress; all three lay awake or waking in September's latent heat to the engine's whining and the subsequent dull thud, the plane striking the earth at a speed that sank most of its body three feet in the ground. And leaving in its wake a woman who would have to bury three caskets in one day and sell off the cattle and harvest all the crops. My God, Mrs. Harold Talant and Mrs. Charles Locke—and Mrs. Rex Beemer turning the lights off in the living room so she could see the cornfield more easily with the room dark, Can you imagine? All three clicking their tongues. “It sounded like it was going to come right into the house.”
It must've been very loud, a sound that registers an immediate meaning in the body, our senses, before reaching the mind. Total loss is almost always loud. No wonder my family prefers quiet over talk—at least about this. And my dad's admonishment ten years ago: *Don't make your mother revisit that time.* He meant well. And he was right; researching the cause of the accident wouldn't bring them back. But I was obsessed. I appealed to my state representative who wrote to the FAA who wrote back and said sorry but investigations of crashes are thrown out after twenty-five years. I went to visit the reporter, Bud Barnes, who wrote the article above. I thought he might have some insight, some untold memory of that night. And it seemed from his article that he knew my grandfather,” a prominent farmer and County Commissioner.” But upon finding his apartment, I learned that Bud had died a few weeks previously of cancer.

This news upset me on many levels and I sat for a long time in my car, just staring at the apartment building—at, literally, a brick wall. I had a great affection for Bud, whom I had known when I worked alongside him at *The Daily Reporter.* I admonished myself for having wasted a chance to talk to Bud then about the accident. If only I had known *he was there* that night, in the cornfield “two hundred yards from the road, which runs east and west” on the Beemer farm. (Bud was always painstakingly specific.)

And he never brought it up with me. Not once. Maybe he didn't realize my relationship or my stake in the story. Maybe it had been too long. Bud was already white-haired and thin, getting thinner, when I met him. He covered mostly recreational articles about fishing and local festivals, so he wasn't around much in the newsroom. And when he was, he strode into the building with the light gait of a man in love with
life—at least, that's how we eulogized him the moment we heard he had terminal cancer—making banter and flirting with the receptionist in passing, winking at me as he passed. Not the type to pause and say, “You know, I was there in that field, with the wreckage and your relatives' remains. It was me who covered the story.”

He was the department's darling, coming and going as he pleased, a fact we all accepted—That's just Bud—and now, when I needed to talk to him most, he had left me to stare blankly at the proverbial brick wall.

That sounds callous. Certainly, I missed Bud and mourned his passing, but he wasn’t blood, that strange synecdoche for which wars are waged and crowns passed down. Our lineage, our legacies. Yes, blood—on that hallowed ground where Bud snapped pictures of the plane’s fuselage of wings of engine; of my grandfather’s wedding band, on which his identity rested quite literally. Identified only through a wedding ring on his hand—the only thing my mother wanted at the funeral—to hold her dad’s huge hands. She needed smelling salts to stay awake. All of this remains even further distanced from me, with one more link in the chain removed. Oh, Bud, I am sorry; you deserve more than that brittle line can tow—and I, more than “debris from the wreckage…strewn over a large area.”

And yet, there was a sigh of relief, a long exhale and swig of beer in reward for having finished typing the tragedy. And then guilt at feeling relief and for drinking beer. Your grandfather didn't drink; we were Methodists. The beer poured out and replaced by a mug of warm milk, which didn't work to quiet the adrenaline. Because the truth is I'll never be done with the tragedy; I've been haunted by it, surely since I was a child,
mystified by this trinity of men killed in a crash—for that is how my grandmother describes it: *When they were killed*—and more fervently in the past ten years, since I began researching the accident for a creative writing workshop in college. Susie’s workshop. When I first sat down to read the article and its baleful captions. “This is all that was left of the tail section of the twin-engine Beechcraft that crashed on a farm northwest of Quincy Thursday night, killing six men.”

I jotted down all of the addresses listed so laboriously in the article, though I dreaded the reason. And I swear, not a minute later I received an email from Jon, my “Bobsey twin”—our father’s longtime nickname for his youngest daughter and son, who look like they come in a pair. And literally, this once, I needed for us to *come as a pair* to the crash site—“or at least drive by it,” as Jon proposes in his note. I am struck by the uncanny timing of this message, and also, by the comfort it brought me. No one levels me like Jon. His disposition is so calm; he inspires confidence in the most nervous of passengers, this *born pilot*.

I set the article down.

But I found I couldn’t walk away from the photographs of the wreckage strewn so casually across my desk. Too many cornstalks bent at right angles. I walked back to my desk and turned the article over. Then placed a picture of Harriet on top.

Curiously, her eyes are either closed or cast downward in this photo, as though she is averting her gaze—or looking down at the sad story I had just set her upon.
Call and Response

I ask your prayers for the departed [especially __________]. Pray for those who have died.

Silence

--Book of Common Prayer, Prayers of the People, Form II

The proverbial call in the middle of the night—I answered and the pastor of our church asked to speak with Mike—and the banal truth that something you loved so fiercely has just as fiercely been ripped from you.

He said there was a plane crash near Quincy and my dad and brother, Doug, had died. Mike’s mom came to the house to stay with Sarah and Mark. We drove to Coldwater and picked up Father Rod Wiltse, the priest from St. Mark’s, where I was employed as the organist.

In the case of the fluke/freak/tragic accident, for the conscious victim, anyway, horror is the time experienced immediately leading up to those split-seconds of violence. The moment of knowing.

At the sight of us coming up the walk, Mom knew. I walked to my youngest brother’s bedroom to tell him and she stopped me. “Dean’s with them,” she gasped.

For the survivor, horror is the recognition that immediately follows. In both moments, meaning is collapsed, folded back on itself.

All three were putting up silage that week. An implement show was being held in Minnesota and rather than driving to the event, which would’ve meant losing valuable time in the midst of the demanding harvest, they took up the offer by the local implement dealer to fly.

Horror happens in the rift. But horror is not the ripping: a plane crash, a car accident. That violence lasts a fractured second, the occasion for our comfort: At least s/he didn’t suffer.

We’d been asleep for a couple of hours when the phone rang.

The moment-of-knowing overwhelms the mind; the body releases. We scream or faint or laugh or_________. We do this because the rift does not actually cut us off from the victims; rather, we take up their place in this moment, the ripping so firmly seated in the imagination, and for that second, if we do not respond in body, grounding us again to the present—we are lost with them.
When we were growing up, Top Gun was Jon’s favorite movie. It was 1986 and he was just five years old, camped out a foot away from the TV and the command to take me to bed or lose me forever—the volume so loud that the roar of engines could be heard outside, swallowing Mom’s orders from the next room to stop sitting so close to the screen and turn that volume down.

I don’t remember thinking he was too young to watch such a racy movie (I was only eight, myself), and I don’t remember thinking it odd that he should love it so much. By that point, we had accepted his passion for all things airplane and had even encouraged it with a kind of amusement. Every flight to Florida (our spring break tradition for a good ten years straight) included a ritual invitation from the captain for Jon to visit the cockpit midflight. I was always jealous of the attention his love of flying received. Or maybe it was that his love was in perfect balance with my utter dread of it. I am still the kind of passenger who grips the armrests at the slightest bump and bang, the kind pilots who are dead-heading hate sitting next to because they know that for the next ninety minutes or so, they have to be a security blanket for the white-knuckled woman by the window.

On one particular return flight from Florida, we took off in the middle of a thunderstorm, and I cried so hard that other passengers complained. I must've looked at my mother with the plea save me across my face—but she was strangely quiet, distracted by whatever she was seeing out the window. Or maybe it was something else that I wouldn’t see for myself until years later, when I accompanied her and my grandmother to the old centennial farm where my grandmother grew up and where my uncle, Doug, lived
before he died: the *Old Centennial Road Farm*. I don’t remember why we were there—probably to clean up whatever disaster the latest “trashy tenants” had left behind. My memory of that house-cleaning is condensed to a single image of my mother and grandmother collapsed on the floor of one of the bedrooms, crying and clutching each other while I watched from the doorway.

I have no idea what my child’s mind made of the sight—if I cried or joined their hug or merely walked out of the room and into the yard to climb a tree. Memory simply shuts off—the metaphor feels true—like someone has turned off the projection screen and flipped on the lights: *Show’s over—that’s it, folks.*

And I am glad it’s over. And in the next moment, scared that it’s not.

While Jon was taking flight lessons at the tender age of sixteen, I interviewed his instructor, Dean VanNasdale, who was working for the Branch County Municipal Airport—the same airport Cliff Hadley was headed toward when his plane crashed, killing all aboard. My grandfather. My uncles. VanNasdale and I were wrapping up our conversation when he mentioned offhandedly the crash that occurred during the filming of *Top Gun*.

There was an air show pilot, he said, by the name of Art Scholl. Scholl did a lot of movie work—he had done it for years. An excellent air-show pilot, very meticulous, very calculating. Scholl was flying an aerobatic pipeline with a camera mounted on the tail for the inverted flat-spin scene. But this camera flanked just enough of the air across the rudder so that he couldn’t recover from the stunt, and his plane spun into the ocean. Scholl died in this scene. His death is memorialized in the movie's credits.
Life Flight

The most dangerous flying there is, Jon says—and when there's weather, how'd you like to be the one to make that call? To go or not. When somebody's life is on the line? And end up risking your own in the process? [head shaking] No thanks. It's Memorial Day and we are outside grilling pork chops and staring up at two Air Care helicopters descending—making the wind chimes go crazy—in a cornfield, one of ours, maybe a hundred meters away.

You know where the sheep barns used to be? My dad knows full well I don't. His way of teasing. Nothing over there now but soybeans. You know where the road stretches flat? That place. Where two teenagers crashed maybe thirty minutes ago—that's when we first heard sirens—racing their cars, probably chasing each other.

The theories gain speed when a second helicopter buzzes overhead. This one's from Toledo; Dad can tell by looking at the direction it flew in from—see?—from the south. My cousin, Laura, is also up visiting on this holiday, just a few weeks shy of her graduation from medical school and her year-long internship in Toledo, picked for its busy ER. Head trauma, she says—head traumas around here are sent to Toledo.

Oh, God [hand to mouth], maybe they hit an Amish buggy. Dad calls Dorothy, the neighbor lady. Other neighbors stop by after garage sales and parades have ended with offerings of friendship bread and first-hand accounts of the car that didn't crash, it just kept on going—didn't even slow down. Going a hundred when the one slid off the road or something, and the ditch is deep there. It popped the back end of the car up [hand motion], flipping like that over and over in the field.

I did a hundred once.

On I-69, the way home from a date and always late for curfew, I pushed the needle until ninety didn't feel that much faster, so ninety-five mustn't, either, and so on for at least a mile with no thought of a deer, a cop, a drunk—until my foot grew tired of pressing down, that's all.

You should write about this, Joel says later that day as we're jogging, trying to shake loose the bad feeling, except we can't help ourselves and try turning down the road that's blocked off now. I could see a piece called Life Flight. And you know, he adds, I was life-flighted—and Susie, she died in the helicopter. You could bring that in, if you needed to.

And then I follow up with the story of my cousin, Josh, just nine years old and lying brain-dead in the ditch for that long—forty-five minutes' silence before a single siren rang. They should've flighted him, I say, out of breath. It wouldn't have saved him, but they should've come and tried.

Later, when the barricades are gone, we drive by the site, trace the skid marks with our eyes to the spot in the ditch where they did a nose dive and flipped and flipped—but you wouldn't know it from looking at the field, so freshly tilled, the dirt falling in our footprints the second we leave them.
Roadster

Dean Smith

On the race
Joel was flown home from Jordan in a body cast. The surgeons at Mass General worked for eight hours to repair his shattered pelvis and crushed sciatic nerve. I am told he nearly slipped from them at one point, he had lost so much blood. But I would learn this later in another update, another email—this time from Joel's family and not from Rhian. (Though she and I would keep in touch for weeks afterward and exchange strange intimacies, no doubt charged with a competitive spirit, some of which made me shift in my seat: Now that he has left for Boston, I feel like my heart went with him and I wish I could be physically close to him again to offer my support.)

Darius too had been injured in the accident. His right leg—just like Daddy's—had been broken, and he sported a neon-blue cast for weeks. And Susan's mother, who was visiting them in Amman, had broken her wrist. Only two other passengers besides Joel and his family were in the van: the driver, who walked away, and the boys' tutor, who died instantly. He was holding Cyrus on his lap in the front seat.

"Thank God you didn't go," my parents cried into the phone. Yes, I said. Thank God. I came home to live with them the summer after I graduated—the summer I would finally break up with my boyfriend—the summer I would begin a daily correspondence with Joel, who was convalescing at his parents' home in Boston. My mother was suspicious. "Can't you see he's in love with you?" In other words: What are you doing? He just lost his wife. She paid for me to get some grief counseling. She took me to museums. On shopping trips. I could feel her willing me to be well, be happy. And to let
Joel find his own way. But I couldn't do any of those things—not completely, and I felt she should understand that, having lost so much herself.

In the fall I joined a doctoral program in southern Ohio. It's clichéd to say, but the move gave me a chance to start over, to refashion myself, to refocus on my art and my teaching. And best of all, I followed no one there. I went alone. And somehow this distance allowed me to be with Joel in a way I couldn't have been otherwise. We began seeing each other, slowly. Once a month I flew to New Hampshire—where he had taken a job at a prestigious boarding school—and he, to Ohio.

The first time I visited, we were as nervous as two people on a blind date. And in many ways, it was a first meeting. The accident had changed us profoundly; we did not feel like the same people, and said so out loud. We said a lot of things out loud. I was selfish. And I was reckless. And I am sorry.

But one thing stayed the same, and would require no words. We couldn't get close enough—couldn't get enough of each other. The night of our first visit, Joel stayed awake. I know this because he whispered into my hair until the alarm clock rang, kissing me, caressing me while I feigned sleep. It was like that the entire first year: exhilarating, exhausting. We spent our days exploring each other's campus—mine, in a historic college town lined with cobble-stone streets; his, on the side of a mountain, its thick coat of trees punctuated by building after building of red brick, green roofs, the occasional church steeple. In these settings, we fell back in love. We grocery shopped. We cooked meals. We attended his school plays (some of which Joel performed in, as a vocalist and former actor—two passions he reclaimed after the accident; two passions
that made him extremely popular and beloved among his students at this academy). We flew kites with Darius. And after tucking him in, Joel and I would duck into the bedroom—wonderfully agonizing, the hours of keeping our hands to ourselves—or on the couch with all the shades drawn and the cushions loose and, yes, damp in spots. We were always turning them over, always swearing to steam-clean them or, at least, put a sheet down next time, but we never made it to the linen closet because the truth is, this was my fantasy: the couch. Where so many of our conversations began, years ago. Where I first watched him caress Susie's feet so many nights until I would retreat to their guest room and to the touch of my own longing. Where Joel says he slept every night, so painful was it for him to share a bed with Susie without being allowed to touch her, to love her. The nightly exiles to the couch were of his own choosing, he says.

And this is still the case when we have a fight and he can't bear to be in the same bed while I'm a million miles away. On these nights, he will pace back and forth between the living room and the kitchen, restless and searching for distraction with food, the TV, email—until he can't take it any longer and he crawls back in bed beside me and curls his body around mine, not a little aggressively, and hugs me, burying his face in my neck. And sometimes, if the fight is exceptionally bad, he will stroke me until I wake, pulling me thread by thread from sleep until we both cry out.
The Writer Plays “Hazel” Quimby in Love

Harriet’s entire love life remains cloaked in mystery, although an article by her friend Clara Bell Brown several years after Harriet’s death reveals Harriet’s youthful unrequited romance with an un-named “Latin” artist. –Giacinta Bradley Koontz, The Harriet Quimby Scrapbook

Cloak, a *loose outer garment*. As in, he removed the cloak from around my neck and spread it over grass, but I pretended not to notice and strode off, coy and cloakless and in search of shade. *Something that envelops or conceals*. The mind’s desire unfettered, who’s to say what might happen? A stolen kiss beneath the catalpas. Reaching up to pluck a bean and tucking it between the bodice’s buttons, tickling her cloaked breast. Or my favorite cloak, *a distinctive character or role*. She hung up her acting cloak to become a writer; she hung up her writing cloak to become an aviatrix; she hung up her marriage cloak, *living in a man’s world and loving every minute of it—but always keeping her striking femininity intact*[^25] as a hymen, the greatest cloak of all. Plug your ears, Mother; I’m playing Sappho, no Romeo, in an unrequited romance with an un-named Latin artist with his unmentionable big part in this play—so this is flight—unlocked in the body’s rocking. Everything’s a rhythm; I can feel what the plane will do before it does it, and I’ll always pitch a man out before myself. So you want to know the one that threw me for a loop-de-loop? Xavier, Ernesto, John, really, what’s in a name? Harriet is dowdy, they said; Hazel zips off the tongue, lightning sharp and to the point. The pen is mightier in a plane! I had to shimmy a woman’s hips into that thing and make her sing miles above this urban wilderness in blues and something in between green. He used so much paint, mixing and swirling it into little pools on the palette, color you could lose yourself in when he tells you his mother taught him about the motion of celestial bodies when he was ten. But by then he was already un-named and would remain there forever in my mind: long black hair, red cravat, corduroy suit pulled tight and wet under the arms as he etched his motherland for hours, sweat collecting at the brow. I traced one, thick and soft, with my finger—these dark lines—and something hot rose up in him, gripping my wrist almost hard and pulling it down to his mouth, taking in all of my fingers until my whole hand fit between his teeth. Half expecting him to bite. But he held me there, like that, to feel the thickness of his tongue. And I knew then, I could never live inside a frame. The only lines I would join up were the inseams of my knickers, a purple flying cloak they will name the first flight suit, and did you know, the mourning cloak is a butterfly?
Even now, I sometimes I catch myself thinking about it—about Susan—while Joel and I make love. I find myself wondering how it felt to her, the intensity of this contact. And sometimes, after the lovemaking, I even verbalize my wonder.

Why do I do this? Joel wants to know. His tone is not sharp, but sad. He pats his chest, motioning for me to rest my head there, to talk in the way spouses do late at night, in the dark. But my thoughts are not completely clear, even to myself. I think the fantasy is partly born of fascination, partly born of fear (why and when did they fall out of love?), and mostly, that disgusting flattery, for the comparison always works in my favor. I know from Joel’s admissions that the sex, what little they were having those last couple years, held little joy for either partner. Hearing these intimate confessions, my hands find their place on Joel’s chest, rubbing just below the breastbone.

And then to a spot lower on the torso, troubling a memory of yet another bed in another time: Georgia. In the wake of the accident, on his return trip to pack up their house—an excruciating move—we laid down fully clothed on a friend's bed, where he was staying. To talk. But he wanted to be touched. Taking my hand, we traced the pink scar arching across his pelvis, like someone drew a smiley face on his abdomen or like—I don’t remember which one of us says it—a C-section. There is certainly something to this physical symbol in the wake of his loss—of a child, of a wife—and of all the ways the body takes and is taken from.
Dream Journal: February-April, 2004

I am swimming, not in a lake or ocean, but in some kind of tunneled river. I'm swimming alongside many people. Sometimes the river turns into a small lake, and I feel safe. Other times, there are houses all along, and suddenly I'm in a boat with a family I don't know.

*

Darius and Cyrus are playing. I hug Cyrus for a long time. He sits in my lap. I ask him, Where's Mama? And he points to a corner of the room where no one sits. She's there.

*

Susie comes to me. She says the answer to my question is yes. When she says this, shivers run through my body. I tell her that I love her—does she know that? All of this takes place on a telephone. It is her voice on the other end. I ask her if we can talk again, and she says yes. I ask her how, and she says, I don't know.

*

Another water dream. This time, I am on a boat in the ocean when a boy onboard falls in. I dive in after him, but when I find him at the bottom, I can't pull him away. He takes my hand. I understand then that he is already dead, and we rush at great speeds along the ocean floor.
When Jon, my Bobsey Twin, was two years old, we nearly lost him. It was summer, the air was hot and full of the smell of hog, and we sat in my grandparents’ house to catch a break in the air conditioning and to visit with family. Somehow Jon slipped out. We searched, my siblings and cousins, all over the house, the garage, the shed—and then the thought registered on my mother’s face like a starter gun had gone off and shot her toward the pool. He was already six feet deep, holding onto the ladder’s last rung. My mother dove in fully dressed, hair and clothing floating loosely around her, trailing after some ethereal water angel.

*

My uncle's best friend, Scott, sits back in his seat, removes a handkerchief from his front pocket, wipes his eyes, then his glasses. “It changed so many people’s lives.”

I begin thinking of Ursula and William Quimby, how they too suffered a kind of death in their daughter’s accident. Their marriage dissolved. William would die not long after. And Ursula?

My mother shakes her head at my grandmother’s resilience. “I don’t know how Mom went on. Losing two children.”

I am trying hard to imagine losing a child. “Like learning you can breathe dirt,” Joel says. “Don’t go there,” he warns. “There’s a reason you can’t.”

On a plane once, I sat by a pilot. I was nervous and told him so, as I have a tendency to do on planes with strangers. I told him about my uncles and grandfather and my beloved brother’s choice of a career, how I worry every day for his fate. This pilot
was Hindu; he made a point to tell me so before warning me of the danger in “entertaining those thoughts.” He never said self-fulfilling, but he might as well have.

Scott says he’s not sure if I’m aware of this, but he was planning to go on the trip. After all, he had gone with Doug to these farm shows the previous two years. But that year, he had a bad feeling. His grandmother, too, started questioning him about flying in a small plane. “It's OK,” he told her.

But he went to Doug: “You know, there's something about this that's bugging me.”

Doug reassured him the plane was sound, and the pilot, experienced. But Scott was uneasy. At that time, he had a job driving truck. He’d always been one to work, to enjoy making an income, and he had been commissioned to drive to New York. It paid well. So he called Doug and said he had to work.

He didn’t know that Doug's younger brother, Dean, would take his seat. Didn’t know it until their names came over the teletype machine at the State Police Post the night of the accident. Scott dropped what he was doing and went out there.

This is what he saw. There was a little indentation in the dirt. Just into that second field a short distance on the right. There was a big tree across the road. They found some of the fellas in this tree. Dean was in the tree.

* 

I long for some reassurance, some sign that history won't repeat. Every day on my walk to school I pass it—Readings $10 Special—on a block framed in elm trees that arch above a street of inlaid brick and houses lined with ivy. A ten-dollar psychic
reading is completely out of sync with this scene. This is why, after several days of approaching a little closer, like an animal inching toward an open palm, I work up the nerve to pop the question to Joel.

“Will you go with me to see a psychic?” And in a higher register, “It’ll be fun.” Like sneaking a flask into the movie theater. Like skinny dipping in the fountain. But he isn't falling for it.

“There are some things,” he says, “we just shouldn’t know.”

“I thought you didn’t believe in them,” I say, and so we play until the playing isn't fun and we're fighting.

“All right, I’ll go.” He throws up his hands. It isn't that I inch toward the sign, then, as much as I pull Joel toward it. His reluctance gives me a button to push, and at the sound of the doorbell, a young dark-haired woman appears. Of course I note her hair. I have an image already in my mind—of raven or, better yet, red hair, real or not—and for this I am disappointed slightly, wishing to be surprised by blonde or bald, tailored or tattooed.

What was it that I am after? I have made a list of questions, not about the future—I am adamant on this point—but about these crashes. What happened to Harriet's plane? And to Cliff Hadley's? And do my grandfather and uncles ever come around the house on River Road? So when the dark-haired psychic answers the door, I am ready, armed with inquiries, prepared to hear anything except you need an appointment. She is all booked up, irritated. I should’ve called.
Suddenly I feel like an intruder, stepping around toys, imposing on her and the baby lying on the living room floor. A girl, I note. Beautiful, dark-haired. She is scooped up and placed on her mother’s cocked hip, the other hip holding the door open for me.

On our walk to the car, Joel tells me not to feel disappointed; he didn’t get a good vibe. “Maybe it's a sign,” he says. Don't worry, he says. “We'll find someone else.”

“Maybe.” But weeks go by and we never do.
Who is Harriet Quimby and Other Trivia

✓ Jon sometimes reminisces about the pranks the crew played on each other. Dirty pictures stuffed in the cockpit’s nooks and crannies. The captain who said “meow” after every announcement. And the one Jon pulled on a flight attendant: *Well, folks, we’d like thank you for flying with us today...and to take a second to wish a member of our flight team good luck next week as she competes on Deal or No Deal. How about a round of applause in the cabin.*

✓ Ever heard of the Sterile Cockpit Rule? he says. The FAA came up with it after a bunch of accidents in the late seventies and early 80s were thought to be caused by distraction in the cockpit. Small-talk, chit-chat. That kind of thing: *Non-essential activities.* The black box says it all.

✓ Black boxes aren’t actually black. They’re orange or red or some other distinguishable color so that rescuers can find them in a crash site. A black box, then, is actually A) a coffin; B) a confessional; or C) a hope chest chock-full of family letters and photos.

✓ Jon says the Sterile Cockpit Rule is enforced only if an FAA guy sits in the jump seat. But, he adds, you know what they say about the FAA’s rules. *They’re written in blood.*

✓ The other night on *Jeopardy!* my grandmother hears the clue, *The first woman to fly across the English Channel.* She nearly called me up, she says, but the moment flew by—the puzzle solved so fast. As it goes with *Jeopardy!*, the question itself is the answer. *Who is Harriet Quimby?*
The other night I dreamed that I could see auras. People's energy. And everyone wanted me to study theirs and tell them what I saw. *Yours is yellow: intellectual. Yours, pink: beloved. Red: passionate, naturally. White: very spiritual or near death. Black, just the opposite.* A predictable rubric.

Only, I couldn’t see my own. Turning around and around like a dog chasing its tail. Mirrors were no help. Shadows, no use. But I woke up feeling warm and something close to good for having gained a second sight, a *sixth sense* like the boy in the movie with the same title. Like my friend, Gwendy—although she says she’s gone away from it now, like a cup you set down and forget.

One night, she and I read cards after Joel and Susie had left the country and something told me they weren't coming back. It's true. Gwendy shuffled and then asked me to cut. “Hold them in your hands,” she said, “and think about your question.”

One after another, she flipped the cards over and rested them on the floor of her apartment, on brown shag carpet like the kind that covered our house before my parents remodeled and traded the shag in for a plush blend in a color called *forest*. We sat like that, cross-legged on the floor, two children playing jacks or marbles, lost in the game, our luck tippling with the flick of a wrist, our eyes glued to the floor with that last telltale flip of the card: *Anything but that.*

“The death card doesn’t mean what you think,” Gwendy rushed in. “It could mean change. Positive or negative.” Change is like that—always charged with a little bit of both. Adding, “There’s so much available to us, so many messages ready to be received.”
I wonder, though, about the ones that go unread. Do they boomerang back to wherever they came from? Keep traveling along some continuum? I can’t remember what Gwendy said about destinies—though I seem to recall her objections to the belief that they’re fixed, written in the stars. Such a hokey line but one that’s tethered to a strange memory my mother once shared. She wanted to have a fourth child, a boy, in a time when overpopulation threatened the lives of the unborn in 1980s China. The call to adopt, she says, was strong in America. My mother wrestled with her conscience—to try for her boy or to save one girl?—a particular night when her husband and two oldest children were at a basketball game and I, her second girl, was asleep in the crib. And she, alone in the bathroom, crying.

My mother wanted a sign.

How does one signify a consciousness of God? The mind can produce visions that aren’t there, hear words without speech, but it can’t always suspend a disbelief in these wild testimonies, in miracles performed and dreams visited—in dried blood that marked my mother’s forehead in the shape of a cross.

What does it mean to suddenly look up in the mirror and see a symbol on one's forehead that wasn't there a second ago? I don’t know what to make of this miracle, if indeed it is one. It seems the “answer” my mom received was not to the question she asked—am I meant to adopt or conceive?—but to some other question lingering in the wake of tragedy: How can I be sure it won’t happen again? How do I let myself live and love completely when it means I’m more vulnerable to suffering and loss?
I only know that my mother took comfort that night, reassured by the proof that
*love conquers death*—her testimony to this day. Yet she would tell no one about this
experience until twenty years later, when I began asking questions about the plane
crash—when the only way she could talk about her past was to put it in a letter.

*I mothered my younger brother, Dean, as we grew. I was nine when he was born.  
I wanted a baby brother and I was the one who chose his name. I used to carry him around on my hip.*

My mother named her fourth and last baby, a boy, *Jonathan.* A name that means in Hebrew “gift of God.” At times she and my grandmother slip and call my brother *Dean.* It’s easy to do. They compare the proof: the handwriting and speech patterns. And most of all, their shared looks: the tall, thin build; the angular face with blue-gray eyes that pinch mid-smile; crooked bottom teeth; hair that's a little coarse and already showing some silver, cut meticulously short (for Jon, the airline's policy).

Once, Jon asked me to trim his neckline and sideburns. Sure, I said, and proceeded to run the clippers up the back of his head without the guard on. I didn't even realize it until I saw his jaw twitch—the one indicator that he's really mad—and rightfully so. He sported a shaved head for weeks, looking nothing like himself.

Or like anyone else.
Scott tells me where to find the rusted corpse of the Beechcraft: in a field behind what was once Cliff Hadley's business, a John Deere dealership—a business now called Bate's Tractor. I have driven by this property many times, passed it on my way to church every Sunday, to piano lessons, on dates with teenage boyfriends. Funny how my daydreams during these drives never turned toward the direction of this field, site of my family's shipwreck.

_It's there. By the fence row._ I know I must go to it. And I will, but only with Jon, my pilot-brother. He's the one I want beside me when we view this memorial. The one who might see something I don't see. The one who might answer my questions and calm my anxiety—for he is the one I worry I can't protect. I can't save.

Already I hear Joel ask in a soft register, “You don't want me to go with you?” And I will reassure him _I do, I do._ But I am scared the viewing will too easily cause him to imagine another one. One he does not remember, thank God, for he was asleep in the van when they crashed.

That quietly, asleep.

Their names uttered only in the whisper of a dream: _Susan. Cyrus._
WHERE THE WATCHERS WAIT
Months after my trip to the Boston Public Library, Joel and I traveled to Michigan—*to the farm*—so that I might gather some more research on the famed aviatrix, and also visit my parents, who were anxious to see Darius after three months of summer camp. They delight in this new grandchild, and he in them. Darius loves assisting my father in his chores, monitoring the barns in winter; helping to harvest corn in the fall; and in the spring and summer, reading books in the hammock with my mother, cradled in the sound of a thousand rustling leaves. Though Darius and I don't share the same *blood*, I don't have to tell him of my experience here, of being a child on this farm. He knows me all the better, and I him, for loving this place.

Yet we are still learning who each other is—and I find this to be quite beautiful, quite extraordinary in a parent-child relationship. “What's your favorite band/movie/book?” It's not uncommon for me to hear this question, or versions of it, a couple times a day. (Tucking him in, he'll whisper, *Rachy, what’s your favorite bird?*) In turn, I find myself wanting to know how he remembers the lake-house in Georgia; what he dreams of most often, both at night and in his waking thoughts; how a particular image, an illustration in a book, looks to him. And he wants to know, some day when I “get a baby,” if I think he'll make a good brother.

At the farm, Darius and my mom headed downstairs to the basement—designated the toy room since I can remember—to search for a game to play. But halfway down the steps, Darius paused to stare at the collage of family photos peppering the wall. He pointed to a picture of *Uncle Jon as a kid*. My mother tells me she stopped, smiled.

“That's my younger brother Dean.”
It doesn't take much work to imagine the conversation from here; it's the same one I had at Darius's age with her. The one that begins with *what happened to him* and ends with *no one knows why*. But Darius, unlike me, didn't press for more explanation, understanding full well this basic law of accidents. “Rachy,” he reported later in a tone both careful and matter-of-fact, “Grandma Di and I have something in common.”

*

The day after the three of us arrived at the farm, I showed up at the Victorian mansion on Pearl Street five minutes early for my four o’clock interview. I was glad to be early for once and take a second to stare at the house again, to reacquaint myself with this (happily, I’m told) haunted ground in downtown Coldwater, Michigan. The Wing House looms large on the corner of Pearl and Jefferson, restored to its original shades of light green and maroon—a garish scheme that appears almost cartoonish in a frame of cracked sidewalk. The mansion, now a museum and headquarters for the historical society, is more than a misfit in the neighborhood; it's a monster drawn up in a dream, a flight of fancy. I imagine it a dragon with expansive green wings and a forked tongue as scarlet as the mansion's trim. Of course I would think it a *flying* thing, for its name—and more so, for what brought me here. The Wing House made the perfect site for my interview with Larry Hoffman, a retired pilot and director of *The Harriet Quimby Re-Enactors Troupe*.

Larry agreed to meet me on a day of the week the museum isn’t usually open (normally, from Wednesday to Saturday, 1-5 p.m.) because I had explained to him over the phone my “deep interest” in Harriet Quimby—that I was desperate to talk to anyone
who had also researched her and who shares a passion for studying her life. Deep. Desperate. Passion. It’s only now that I realize these were serious verbal cues; they must’ve registered like a secret handshake, identifying me as a member of this exclusive society.

“It’s uncanny, isn’t it, Larry? How much she looks like Harriet? You should ask her to dress up.”

That she was me. The person speaking: Roland Stoy of The Coldwater Daily Reporter, our small-town newspaper. I once worked alongside Roland when I was in college, interning for the paper as I tried to figure out what I wanted to do with my writing. I knew journalism to be a smart and practical path. I had served on both my high school and college newspaper staffs and performed well enough. Then one semester I took Freshman Comp and ended up showing my grandmother an essay I wrote about a woman farmer my father employs. Without asking me (she must’ve figured, naturally, I’d support and even appreciate the impulse), my grandmother passed it along to The Daily, and before I knew it, my essay appeared on the feature page of Friday’s paper. And not long after that, I received an offer to intern the following summer. I don’t regret accepting the invitation. Very quickly it helped me to figure out what I don’t want to do with my writing: show up at old places looking for something new to fill the page before deadline.

And yet, that’s exactly what I was doing.

Five minutes early, I met Larry outside the front entrance of the Wing House. He looked embarrassed to have been caught without the key to the museum (he had loaned it
to Dick Green of the historical society), but really, he was nervous that I’d be upset—
because who showed up next but Roland, followed by Dick Green. Dick Green, who
drove a Hummer, walked with a cane, and later asked to sit next to me because he's hard
of hearing. And besides, he said, “You're kind of pretty.”

Whatever. I waited for him to leave after Larry was given the key. But oddly,
Dick waited beside me while Larry walked to the side door to let me in. I offered to
follow Larry across the yard, but he gestured to a foot of snow still on the ground, his
words trailing after him: Don’t want you to get your feet wet.

So there I was, left high and dry on the front steps of the Wing House with the
Hummer guy and Roland Stoy, whom I hadn't seen in years. “Do you remember me?” I
asked Roland. “I’m Rachael Pridgeon—well, Peckham now; I got married....”
Prompting him further, “I used to intern at the paper.”

“Oh, right,” he said. “You look different.”

Apparently I looked more like Harriet Quimby (you should ask her to dress up)
than I did me, a conflation I didn't bother teasing out in our small talk. Roland, on the
other hand, looked exactly as I remembered him but slightly grayer now—this middle-
aged man with the same ruddy complexion, sagging belly, scruffy hair. His front teeth
have a gap between them. His bottom teeth are crooked and stained.

His smile, though, is warm. Not surprisingly, he's still just as easy to talk to. I
think that must be his saving grace. That, and his good rapport and long-standing
knowledge of the town—the reason he hasn’t been fired all these years. Because, as
earnest and likable as Roland Stoy is, he’s a terrible reporter, infamous for misquoting his subjects.

It wasn’t until I worked on the other side of the counter that I gained some insight into the reason for all the misquoting: I suspect Roland has narcolepsy. I can’t tell you how many times I watched the man fall asleep mid-sentence, his forehead actually hitting the keyboard. Once I watched him erase an entire paragraph by mistake. When he woke up and realized it, he let loose a litany of swear words at his computer, which he called Mac, appropriately: Damn you, Mac. God dammit to hell. He once threw the mouse against the wall and broke it, cursing the cursor that stopped working after that.

Another time, I was sitting behind him at an intersection. Roland rode a motorcycle then. I don’t know whether he still does (he was driving a dark green Oldsmobile Alero that day—”must be new,” Larry observed), or whether the motorcycle was just a summer thing. At any rate, the light at the intersection was red. And then green. But Roland didn’t move; he just sat there, with his head bent forward real far, as if he might be checking some gauge very closely. Only I knew what was happening. Cars honked. And then to my horror, Roland—bike and all—fell over, right there in the middle of the road. I’m ashamed to say I didn’t get out of my car to help. I just sat there and watched as he woke up swearing, picked up his bike, adjusted his helmet. And rode off.
Driving Down Quimby Road, the Writer Gets Lost

Goddamn—and I never utter that word, my own superstition rising up—one field looks exactly like the next, and I lose my bearings just as quickly as I find them. I grew up in this area, my family laughs; how do I not know my way yet? But I am all turned around this morning. Jon found the NTSB report, the official write-up of weather conditions that night, Clifford Hadley's total log-time in the air, and most importantly, the probable cause of the crash, something called Spatial Disorientation. That's what I described to you, Rach. His body was telling him one thing and the instruments were telling him another. This is what happened to JFK, Jr. Instead of trusting his instruments, he listened to his body. Neither one, body nor logic, is speaking to me right now in my search for Quimby's alleged birthplace on Rose Lake in Ovid Township. Naturally, I turn down Quimby Road. But it's not looking familiar, not leading me to where I'd like to go. Typical. I flick the radio off. When I'm frustrated or struggling to concentrate, the slightest noise sets me off. Such sensitive ears, my newlywed husband remarks. Joel and I are in a long-distance marriage while I finish up this degree (and, accordingly, this book), which means we're unrelenting “road warriors,” battling the highways in weekend car trips to each other's respective college town or to see my family on the farm or to see his out east and then jump back in the car with child and dog in backseat and make the long trek to Maine every summer to work at the private boys' camp on East Pond. Which ain't no pond by Midwestern standards but one big chain of lakes, and we know lakes—we capitalize them—and don't get me started on the accents—everyone knows journalists are trained in the Midwestern tongue. This, our banter, when the going's good. And when it's bad, the radio's shut off. Joel already knows to navigate these moods with pointed offers to let me drive or have total power over the music selection windshield wipers air temperature vent position turn signal—he always leaves his turn signal on—often I have to reach over and shut it off—sometimes I do so before he's even realized it, so that we're sort of driving the car together, with Joel in the driver's seat and me at the controls. I make a terrible passenger. A running theme here in planes, trains and automobiles? Or a residual tendency on the part of the one who taught me to drive? What is that crap? My Dad asked us one morning on the way to church, no less, when Jon and I were teenagers. Dad, we said, the lyrics are we live in a beautiful world. Not prone to orneriness, our father's reprobation is a repeated punch line that Jon and I exchange whenever the lyrics come over the radio, when no one dares touch that dial and hot damn the disc jockey plays only those songs we know by heart.
“Yeah, I guess I do look different,” I said back to Roland. I stared at my feet, shifting my weight from one to the other before working up the nerve to ask him what he was doing there. Roland fidgeted, said he was told there was “a thing” here on Harriet Quimby at 4:00. He looked away then as Larry unlocked the front door. That’s when I realized it. I’ve been set up.

I think I might’ve smiled, too. Here I was, “desperately” trying to find Harriet's story—and finding myself, instead, the subject of someone else’s story. And a perfect pawn for the historical society’s promotion. At any rate, what could I do? Call them on it? Turn around and leave? What harm will it do, I asked myself. Use it.

On this note, I was entirely prepared for, and somewhat expected, Larry Hoffman to be suspicious of me. After all, that was my experience in initially asking a well-known aviation historian and “Quimby expert” for suggestions on where to start this search. (Her only answer: “Besides my book?”) And she's not the only one guarding her territory, vying for a sneak peak at a private letter here, the rights to a photograph there; I’ve been surprised by my own competitive stake in this race to find Harriet Quimby. I openly acknowledged as much to Larry, who nodded, and for the first time in the conversation, I could feel us both settling in a little, relaxing in our chairs: Can you believe she designed the first flight suit? Did you hear the story of how she almost crashed when her skirt got caught in the gears? Can you imagine having castor oil sprayed constantly in your face—man, she must've had chronic diarrhea.
An hour flew by; we had bonded. Larry loaned me books and personal photographs, which I pledged to return. And someday, to show him the fruits of this labor.

But the last promise was disingenuous, and I think we both knew it deep down. I repeated that I wasn't writing a biography; I wanted to make that clear. But I didn't vocalize the rest of my thoughts: *Who can rely on biographies, anyway? Quimby changed her age, her entire life story. A mystery she cultivated. And why? To inhabit a new identity.*

And who were we—fellow dreamers—to unfasten and try it on ourselves: First, the black boots buttoning up to the knee where the silk pants tuck in snugly. Next, slinking into the tight flight suit itself, up and over the torso, following the graceful curve of shoulders, saving the wrists for last. And those eyes, peering darkly, impishly, out from under the suit’s hood, striking an uncanny resemblance to—I’m not the first to say it—the grim reaper.
Miss Harriet Quimby

Who Was Killed with Her Passenger, W. A. P. Willard, by a Fall into
Dorchester Bay, Near Boston, Last Evening.
“I’ll show you the script,” Larry said. He meant the script he wrote for his Harriet Quimby Re-Enactors. He wanted me to read it, in hopes that I’d join the troupe and “help take the show on the road” for Coldwater’s Annual Fly-In the first weekend in June.

Wait a minute—what was happening? I was supposed to be controlling the interview, my own “script.” Instead, one guy snapped my picture while another scooted close enough for me to feel his arm hair brush mine, while yet another coaxed me to dress up and assume the voice of a woman who'd been dead for almost a hundred years. It was more than weird and a little troubling—admittedly flattering—as though all of us just wanted the same thing: To be inside her. To be her.

Larry followed me to the door, repeating his offer: “So, the script?”

“I’ll think about it,” I said.

“We’ll get you in that costume one way or another.”
“Grad Student Does Dissertation on Quimby”

By Roland Stoy-Staff writer
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COLDWATER — They gave up searching for Amelia Earhart.

Although it is known that aviation pioneer Harriet Quimby died in a plane crash near Boston in 1912, much of her life remains shrouded in mystery, and some, including Larry Hoffman of Coldwater, remain on the trail.

Rachael Peckham, formerly Pridgeon, Branch County native and a former intern at The Daily Reporter, is also searching for Quimby as she works on her doctoral dissertation at Ohio University.

More specifically Tuesday afternoon in a meeting with Hoffman at the Wing House, she was searching for insight into the persona of Quimby and those who keep the memory of the extraordinary woman alive through re-enacting.

Hoffman told Peckham he moved here in 1996, following a military career in aviation, and became a member of the Historical Society.

“I happened to see a book and was captivated by the person in the book,” said Hoffman. “I couldn't believe all she had done. In my opinion, she had outdone Amelia.”

Among other things, he cited his great interest in history.

While Hoffman noted many people in these parts do not know of Quimby, it is not for lack of his efforts with young women who resemble Quimby doing re-enactments and presentations at organizations and schools.

Asked Peckham, “How do you embody her persona—how do you know how to portray her?”

“By what we can piece together from reports,” replied Hoffman, listing such characteristics as her obvious courage, nerves of steel, and that she was way ahead of her time in being a feminist when there were few. Her many newspaper and magazine articles had to be submitted under the byline of a man, or they would not have been accepted.

Hoffman described her as “bohemian,” a word seldom used these days, meaning someone who lived an unconventional lifestyle.
He recalled a quote by Quimby when she was asked if it was difficult to get her pilot's license.

“Yes,” she replied, “but not as difficult as getting the vote.”

Women in this country were not given the right to vote until 1920.

Peckham and Hoffman talked for nearly an hour, also going over some books and materials he had brought with him.

She shared that part of her interest is due to a history of flying and writing in her family. She also told Hoffman, “I am drawn to her for the same reasons as you...a combination of her talent and beauty.”

Peckham, the daughter of Mike and Diane Pridgeon of Montgomery, said she was not sure of what her final paper will look like, as she pursues her PhD in creative writing and non-fiction.

It was noted Peckham bears a resemblance to her subject.

“Absolutely,” Hoffman said, when asked if she could re-enact Quimby.
Figure 1—Larry's drawing of the aviatrix's boots and gloves
Becoming Quimby

*Something comes over them that makes them become that person each time they put that costume on.* —Larry Hoffman, on his re-enactors’ experience playing Harriet Quimby

So why don’t you, my husband asks, play Quimby? He means in writing. We’re lying in bed—the conversation after lovemaking always turns to writing, passion met with passion. The dog is having a dream on the floor beside the bed. His feet keep twitching, and I can only imagine what he’s running from—or toward. Use Quimby, my husband says, as a mythological figure. Don’t try to make her *real.* That’s what’s scary about these re-enactors; they think they’re channeling. They actually believe that they’re not playing a role—that they’re channeling the people they’re presenting. So you talk to a Civil War re-enactor and he thinks *he’s* the guy who was at Gettysburg. (They actually pick certain people to research—not just making it up.) And they lose sight of that line between fantasy and reality. There’s a name for that, you know: paranoid schizophrenia. No, Quimby isn’t your alternate identity; she’s your muse, your Virgil. Better yet, your Beatrice. Beautiful, tragic Beatrice. I mean, here’s someone who actually *died* in a plane crash. Why is it the pilot’s fault? Why does a pilot want to believe it’s another pilot’s fault? So they have control. So it can’t happen to you, as long as you’re on your *A* game. Talk about what actually happened. Let her speak—let her be one of the people talking. Don’t talk *about* her. Let her speak.
Scott tells me he was in college, looking for part-time work, when he got involved with my grandfather and uncles' cattle operation, Smith River Farms. Bob and Doug hired him in the spring of 73. It was during this time that Scott watched the relationship between Bob and Doug buckle slightly under the strain of a business partnership. He wasn't deeply involved in their talk about these matters, but he could feel it. He was around quite a bit when they treated cattle—giving injections and those types of things—and he could feel the tension sometimes.

That spring there was a farm accident and Scott was burned severely with anhydrous ammonia. “It's not really part of the story,” he says, but at that time, there was a new statute or law regarding anhydrous ammonia—that you had to have a water tank available in case of emergency. Doug and Scott debated one day on whether or not to fill this little water tank (it was empty), and Scott said, “Yeah, let's do it.”

The precaution would save him. A valve blew up on the plow they were fixing. The blast froze Scott’s face solid, burned his eyes. He couldn't breathe. It was in his throat. Doug grabbed the water tank—shoved the hose down him, got him going again.

But he lay in the hospital for weeks while all the skin fell off his face. “Just turned black and fell off.” He wore patches on his eyes.

*

The setting for my wedding photos is not far from the orchard where my grandparents’ wedding photos were shot. Joel and I posed for just one picture outside the church in Coldwater as we departed for the reception, clutching each other’s hand—for affection, yes, but also to keep from falling. It is December in this photo, and a war is
raging in a part of the world that borders Susan’s motherland, where her aunts, cousins, and elderly grandmother still live. Mourning her loss. Missing her hard. Though it has been a long time since Susan lived over there.

Over here, I see Susan every time I look at Darius, now eight years old. She is present when I practice piano with him, read to him, lose to him on the ball court in a game of Around the World. He wants me to chase him around the hoop, I know, to be caught and tickled, to squirm with delight on the ground. How I love this falling the most.

“You'll be the best big brother someday,” I tell Darius, adding “the emphasis on someday.” He giggles.

Darius likes naming “best’s” as much as he does listing favorites. You're the best daddy, he tells Joel. And I'm the best mommy, though I am not Mommy to him by nickname—and that's OK, he knows. For a long time, whenever I introduced Darius to a friend or colleague, he would duck behind my back or cling like a barnacle to my side, then clutch my hand hard, pumping it up and down and saying My Rachy repeatedly, until the person either acknowledged it with an awkward laugh—oh, really?—or grabbed my other hand, declaring me his or her Rachy, too. And the whole thing would unfold like this—no, she's mine—until I feigned a big head (and sore hands). At first, I worried over this possessiveness, worried that Darius's need to claim me was driven by an anxiety, a fear that I too might vanish.

“Well, of course he's anxious,” Joel says to this. “But you must understand, he loves you.” And “it could be worse. It could've worked out the other way around.”
He is right, of course. I have heard of other stepmoms, friends of mine, who have had to battle ex-wives and shared custody battles. Who have had to work to earn their stepchildren's trust, affection, and acceptance. I have been spared these growing pains. Mostly, I do battle with myself and my own insecurity. With the impulse to judge myself against Susan, whom I placed on a pedestal long before she died. With the fear that I'm her impersonator, an imposter of the worst degree.

But it could be worse; it is not my widower-husband who commits this comparison but me. And if he does compare us, it is usually to my advantage, which makes me feel good at first and then guilty. I have actually uttered out loud—usually to the empty director's chair in my living room to which I assign all my ghosts—"He said it, not me." Or, "I know what you're thinking, but...." Or, "I didn't mean that; I'm sorry."

I do wonder how she thinks I am doing, mothering Darius. I have never lifted up his sleeve and actually bitten him (I didn't mean that), but I have spoken sharply to him and made him cry on more occasions than I want to admit, and punished him with long time-outs. When this happens, I feel like shit. Like the room has gone too quiet, the director's chair suddenly empty.
Off the Record

I am officially one of them. An impersonator, an imposter, a fraud. Biographers, go ahead and compare notes. Librarians, here are your books and articles back. Pilots, I don’t presume to know the first thing about your profession. You might say I’m flying blind. It’s that thrilling and that terrifying, writing a book about someone you’ve only now discovered, when she was right there the whole time—but she kept so quiet. [Pressed up against the countertop in an office lounge.] I am fighting her all the while. Hold still, I say. [Give me your hand—no here.] Let me look at you. She squirms loose, escapes my hold. I am left clutching air, a wisp of her hair, dark brown like mine. Oh, if we could just get a peek, just loosen the garment long enough for her to breathe again, what might she tell us then? What might it sound like, her whisper, a cry caught in the throat, rapture’s last gasp. No use fighting me. I’ll get you out of that costume one way or another.
The people who moved into my mom’s childhood home—when my grandmother sold it after the accident and bought a place in town, taking with her even the bumper stickers on Dean's bedroom door—attest to strange things happening. The most frequent of them, a doorbell that rings periodically and produces no visitor. Not one that can be seen, anyway. My unspoken thought.

I have always had a fascination and fear of ghosts, ever since Jon and I watched an episode of *Unsolved Mysteries* one Halloween and we couldn’t sleep alone for the entire year I was nine and Jon, seven. My mom would tuck us in our own rooms and coach us to count to a hundred, shaking her head because she knew the minute she left we’d skip 1 to 99 and bolt for the sanctuary of the other’s twin bed. More than the show's featured hauntings—talk about bad re-enactments—*Unsolved Mysteries* cast a spooky shadow over everything in reach (*that dresser in the corner, was that top drawer pulled out a second ago?*) and everything on screen, even the campy, more comic stuff. Jon feared “the pink ghost” from *Ghostbusters*, the one who *shooshes* the library patrons at the film’s beginning. 12 My ghosts were more amorphous, without a face but definitely of human form, always standing in the doorway so that I couldn’t bear to sleep facing them. But neither could I turn away—out of caution, curiosity?—so that most nights I’d compromise by facing the doorway with the blanket over my eyes.

Now I look back and realize my fright, like most irrational fear, was not actually of the ghost/thing itself—I still long for a sighting, a good story—but of whatever it stood-in for, like a variable in a mathematical function. What was on the other side of

12 I've promised Jon that I wouldn't psychoanalyze the “pink ghost” who haunts his preadolescent imagination.
that variable? (A soul/spirit/memory/desire?) I'll never solve it. Is this why my ghosts are caught in the doorway, in some threshold between the material and the imagined, between memory and fantasy? In pinning them in the door frame, I also entrap myself in this impasse, since they block the only way out. Funny, it never occurred to me to try running through them, if indeed one appeared like the transparent librarian does in *Ghostbusters*, hovering in the stacks. They might as well have been fully material, flesh and blood—as real as the re-enactors who played them on *Unsolved Mysteries*. And in many ways, they already were.

Is that why I am scared to be alone in the basement of my grandmother’s house on the afternoon of my second interview with Larry Hoffman, an interview so short (he had to be somewhere soon) that I leave the Wing House not ready to go home yet? I get in my car with no plan at all and turn down streets until I stop in my grandma’s driveway. No one’s home. My grandma is still in Florida for half the year. But I punch the code, anyway, and duck underneath the garage door as it creaks awake. When I step inside, the first thing I recognize is the smell. Every house wears a smell—and of all the senses, smell is believed to carry the strongest attachment to memory. Square this equation and you get my grandmother’s house, which smells slightly of basement all over, as though all the old things down there can’t be contained and float up through the walls. Walking in, what I smell is the collection of things that in turn carry the scent of another house and another time gone by, memorialized on shelves and in closets underground, as though my grandmother couldn’t bear to face them every day on the first floor. But neither could she turn them away, relinquishing them to the basement. A professor in college (he was a
scholar of the American Gothic) once explained *objective correlative* this way: “Pay attention to the characters' movements,” he said. “Notice when they go up or downstairs”—especially downstairs, which he regarded as the architectural floor plan of the *unconscious*.

I don't want to go down there, but I know I must—it’s where all the goods are, like the letter I find on top of a dresser in one of the spare bedrooms. It's written to my Aunt Sue, my mom's younger sister, from my grandmother. I wonder if she ever gave it to my aunt, or if it was merely a rough draft, scribbled on a tiny page like you'd find in a pocket-sized notebook:

Sue,

After reading the wonderful write-up it filled me with such love and excitement. You remember when you were a Co-op student at the hospital? Your first paycheck, you bought your dad and I a lovely chair. Remember when you were picked outstanding student nurse? The trophy is still here at home. Remember when we got you your first car? A red coup. How cute you looked.

With such a sudden loss of Bob and the boys you’ve continued to live a life they would be very proud of. Even though they are gone from our midst they remain in our hearts with love.

Sue, you’re so very outstanding. Wondrous, as the writer said. May God continue to surround you with love, as you give so much of yourself to others.

Mom

Reading this note, it could just as well be written to me from *my* mom. The phrasing is so similar, the salutation exactly the same. The similarity delights me, for some reason. Perhaps because I know how much I relish my mother's praise and am happy to see that this was modeled for her and passed on, even after the tragedy. I know I will write the
same notes to Darius. How deserving he is of this \textit{wondrous} bond, mother and child.

How badly I want that for us both.

\textit{—as you give so much of yourself to others.}
An Ingenious Combination

My suit is made of thick wool-back satin, without lining. It is all one piece, including the hood. By an ingenious combination it can be converted instantly into a conventional appearing walking skirt when not in use in knickerbocker form. –Harriet Quimby, 1911

She thinks about wedding dresses long after her own—and the ones she didn't pick. Mostly, the high-necked one, lace bodice, asymmetrical gather—or, the designer one, French silk, mermaid cut, no embellishment. Her mother laments the price: How will I tell your dad. The dress stays in the fitting room. Along with the discontinued one with the fabric she cannot help but run her hand over and over again, a patchwork of pieces with edges torn, not cut, texture its own embellishment. Not this one, either. Her mother makes the final pick: A-line and corset-tied, capped sleeves added—then removed—then traded for a pair in three-quarter-length—then stuffed into the bodice—then taken out for the reception, like two dresses in one—then replaced by a bolero jacket in matching ivory organza that her grandmother stitches by hand three weeks before the big day. When she walks down the aisle, someone whispers, A true bride. What makes a bride true? she wonders. Does she feel True? The versatile sleeves stuffed down the sides of the dress make her itch during the ceremony. When her new husband unties and unsnaps and works the dress down over her hips like a heavy sigh, he will kiss the red design on her stomach and ribs where the beads pinched and pressed against skin, the lovely sore lasting for days.
It is nearly a year since my trips to the Wing House, and I have not yet told Larry that I won't be joining The Harriet Quimby Re-Enactors. That I won't be taking the show on the road with him. I doubt he'll dwell on my decision very long. I can already see Larry shrugging his shoulders, reaching down to rub away a scuff mark on the toe of his shoe, as I watched him do a few times during our interviews. I have gotten what I needed from him—a close look at Harriet's cult following, at our collective obsession with representing her—and he from me, it seems, with the free publicity.

Mostly, I am exhausted with role-playing. Burned out on performance. But we are always performing, comes the retort, for each other. Perhaps. A few weeks after Joel and I married, my mother told me that a guest at our wedding, a former friend of her brother's, looked up and saw Doug's face “out of the blue” smiling back at him during the ceremony. He shared this with my mother, who shared it with me. “It was just as if he was right there with me,” the friend reported. “I could see him so clearly, and of course, I hadn't seen him since high school.”

There is so much more I want to know. I want to ask this friend what my uncle looked like. I want to ask where exactly my uncle stood in that moment, right there with me, as I became a wife and a mother.

And yes, I wonder if there were others present that day, watching on—and I wonder if they too were smiling. Again, I can hear Joel asking me why I do this. I know that he worries about my tendency to entertain a question—what would they have wanted?—that can never, or perhaps shouldn't, be answered. Such insistence tells me he struggles with the question himself—or did, at one time. When I press him about the
question of guilt, he shifts uncomfortably. Why do I do this? I don't want to cause him more grief, but I need to know—selfishly, to absolve me of my own guilt?—and the more he squirms, the more I push him, and us both, into a corner.

“Look,” he whispers, “I have clarity about two things. I love you desperately, and that's not going to change. And I love Darius. I hang on to those two things because everything else gets so confused.”

Before he can ask, Is that enough? I am out of my own seat. I take his face in my hands. I don't know what “enough” is—enough words, enough regret, enough grief?—and I am scared I will never have clarity on those meanings. And more confusing, I am scared and pretty sure I won't need to in order to love him desperately right back, the way I have always loved him—before the words, the regret, and the grief.

“O.K,” I say.

I have never been as good at the love-talk—we joke about this—but I know that this too is O.K., even endearing to him. At the end of our kiss, I clamp his chin between my teeth—not hard, just enough—and fill the cleft with my tongue.
NOTES

1 “Miss Quimby and Manager Willard Killed at Squantum Aviation Meet,” The Boston Post 2 July 1912.
2 “Miss Quimby and Manager Willard Killed at Squantum Aviation Meet.”
3 “Birdwoman and Man Fall to Death at Flight's End,” Boston Herald 2 July 1912.
4 “Miss Quimby and Manager Willard Killed at Squantum Aviation Meet.”
9 “Miss Quimby is Buried,” Coldwater Courier 6 July 1912.
11 “Birdwoman and Man Fall to Death at Flight's End.”
12 “Fall from Aeroplane Kills Willard and Miss Harriet Quimby at Atlantic,” Boston Daily Globe 2 July 1912.
15 Holden, Ladybirds 19.
16 “Miss Quimby and Manager Willard Killed at Squantum Aviation Meet.”
17 “Fall from Aeroplane Kills Willard and Miss Harriet Quimby at Atlantic.”
18 “Miss Quimby and Manager Willard Killed at Squantum Aviation Meet.”
19 “Miss Quimby and Manager Willard Killed at Squantum Aviation Meet.”