

Soft Landing

I.

One night, as I lay awake in the sweltering darkness, the stars called me back to the beginning. I went outside and gazed skyward where Orion hung low and the Milky Way dangled within reach. A current of evolution stirred; suddenly I was certain of my fetal wings.

Pressing my bare soles against the humid ground, I angled my crooked spine and pushed up on swollen knees. I was aloft.

I should have been ashamed, a tiny woman of a certain age, allowing the world to see her nethers as she soared toward the antique moon. But no. The thrill of the evening breeze lifting my thin gown only made me laugh. My center of gravity shifted; the years molted away like useless feathers.

Circling over all that I knew, I saw the sorrows and joys blinking below me like runway lights. My slack biceps became an aileron, my calcified trunk a fuselage. The air rushed over the hump of my back, creating lift. The vertigo of natural forces. The glide of ancient impulses. It was as easy as dreaming.

Night after night, I took to the air. Sometimes, I could sense a ripple in the currents, the way a familiar room feels after a stranger has lingered. Then I knew I was part of an invisible flock. There were others who had remembered the time before time, when we all had wings.

II.

The gate for my plane was at the end of Concourse B. I made my way slowly on thick Birkenstocks, bewildered by all the rushing to nowhere. The hoard of travelers parted around me, a stream rushing around a heavy stone.

I arrived at my gate with forty-five minutes to spare. Resting in the boarding area, I picked them out easily. The splotched man with goggle-like sunglasses who wouldn't stop tilting his face toward the sun. The woman wearing a billowy, blue muumuu, fat flaps beneath her arms. The somber gentleman in a wheelchair with reedy legs and owl eyes. The squat woman with the broad shoulders, whose grandchildren ambled behind her in a V.

When the flight arrived, these were the people who boarded first—all of us hollow-boned creatures who required extra time. My seatmate was a twitchy man with a sharp nose and eagle-black eyes. As the engines ignited, he gave me a dentured smile.

An hour into the flight, I was jostled awake by the turbulence. I glanced at the man beside me, resisting the urge to grab his hand. It was then that I noticed his legs planted rigidly on the floor, and I could tell that he was doing the same thing I was doing—pressing his soles against the metal floor, ready to leap.

When the engine spit fire over the Rockies, my heart stuttered against my ribcage. Outside of the window, the sun spilled vermillion. Behind us, a plume of dark smoke.

Fasten your seat belts and place your heads down on your knees. Women screamed; men sobbed into their hands. As the plane dove, the cabin walls groaned. Luggage shifted in the holds. Strangers united in prayer.

My seatmate, however, was unafraid. Against instructions, we unfastened our seatbelts, knotted our hands together and waited. Two hundred bodies thundered into the sky. The air snatched our voices. People fell like rain.

But those of us who remembered, threw open our arms and flew.