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# The Birdmen

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BONNIE J. ROUGH

### *The Birdmen*

Most of the birds we see every day are passerines—perching birds. They include everything from chickadees to ravens, finches to birds of paradise. They are mostly small and seemingly simple. But they are considered to be highly evolved because their front toes oppose a back toe. When they hop onto a reed, or a twig, or a rail, the weight of their body triggers leg tendons to clamp the toes shut. They can't let go. This keeps them safe.

*Autopsy: High blood alcohol in dead student*

*Preliminary autopsy results show that a UI junior who died after falling from a second-floor apartment balcony late last month had a blood-alcohol content of more than three times the legal limit.*

*Joseph Domke died from blunt force injuries to the head after tumbling from the balcony at 201 E. Burlington St. around 2:30 a.m. on Aug. 31. He was rushed to UI Hospitals and Clinics, where he later died.*

*Domke's death has since been ruled accidental. Friends said on Thursday that Domke simply lost his balance and fell backwards off the balcony, which was secured by a rail.*

—The Daily Iowan

Adults dream often of falling. The only theme more common is being chased. When people are asked to recall dreams from childhood, dreams of falling and being chased are again most common—along with dreams of flying.

According to most dream dictionaries, dreams of flying are metaphors for success. Dreams of falling are metaphors for failure.

*UI junior Nancy Bielski, who attended high school with Domke in Apple Valley, Minn., said her friend of four years was a normal 20-year-old. "He was a college kid who had fun, and liked to party on weekends, and go out on weekends. Typical college behavior," she said.*

Unexpected falls have problems beyond the obvious. Unless you have time to prepare a defense, everyone left behind will judge you.

*In an e-mail provided to The Daily Iowan, Iowa City Police Chief Samuel Hargadine wrote: "FYI, the kid that fell off the balcony and killed himself had a BA level of .25."*

Things Joe loved: Country music, pillows, cowboy hats and belt-buckles. Secretly, the piano. His mom, for her aching love, his dad for his goofiness, his brother for his toughness. Like his parents, he loved the bald eagle. He gave his father gifts—carved eagle statues, small soaring ornaments. Joe loved his Hawkeyes, and had the Iowa mascot on some of his hats, on one of his silver flasks. Joe loved Seven-and-Sevens. Whenever he went out, he picked up soda where he could. But he always carried his Seagram's with him, in three, even four, flasks. On an ordinary night out—like that Tuesday—Joe would have finished all of that whiskey. Omar kept one of the flasks Joe carried that night. It is still full. He dumped another, half-full.

*A friend of Domke's, UI junior Michelle Carlino, criticized the police's handling of his death. "They just thought he was a stupid college kid."*

Tuesday, August 30, 2005, was Joe's first day at the attorney's office. He expected to make copies, to stuff envelopes, to troubleshoot the coffeemaker. But the attorney handed him a new bankruptcy case and said, "OK. Get to work."

So that night, the guys went out to celebrate. At the bar, Omar and Joe honed their idea for the cowboy saloon they wanted to open someday in Iowa City. Joe said his bouncers wouldn't be assholes. Omar said, "I have to go to the ATM." But as usual, Joe said, "No you don't." Omar didn't want to borrow cash from Joe, because Joe never let him pay back. But this time, to keep Omar by his side, he promised to accept ten bucks the next day.

*Apologize*

*I would like to address this letter to Police Chief Hargadine:*

*I am writing you today to express my disdain toward the comments you publicly offered regarding the death of my friend, Joseph Domke ("Autopsy: High blood alcohol in dead student," Sept. 16). Despite any opinions or obligations you have about the enforcement of underage drinking, I believe your comment was irresponsible and inconsiderate. Your blasé comment*

*about “the kid that fell off the balcony and killed himself” has added to the overwhelming sorrow his friends and family are going through right now.*

*—Jacob Adler, UI student*

Back at the apartment, Joe and Omar went out to the balcony. Just to chill, like they always did. It was a little balcony, intimate, with a narrow, green-painted metal railing not more than an inch wide. People hopped up there all the time.

A little after two a.m., on the sidewalks a story below, downtown bar staff chatted and smoked as they walked home from work. Omar felt like going in. He opened the sliding-glass door and started to step inside. Joe had been sitting in a plastic chair, or maybe on an ice chest. He moved from his seat to standing, then put his back against the rail. He hoisted himself up, hoisting a little too hard.

Omar turned from the doorway to see his friend’s feet disappear over the rail.

Across the street, a woman screamed.

Joe’s head hit the curved end of a metal hand rail below, and his body landed in front of it, on the sidewalk. The roommates tore downstairs, calling paramedics from their cell phones. One cried, “Joe! Joe! Can you hear me? Does your neck hurt?” They saw blood spreading fast from beneath Joe’s head. But it still wasn’t too much, they thought. He would just have a mean concussion. Omar listened for Joe’s breathing. It was there. It sounded like snoring.

#### *Responsibility check*

*In regards to “Friends of Dead Student Upset,” (DI, Sept. 22), my response to the students who are angry is: How is having a blood alcohol level over the legal limit an accident? I agree that this whole situation is a tragedy, but when Joseph Domke decided to drink the night of his death, he made a conscious decision to do so. Granted, falling off a balcony and killing oneself is an accident, but taking responsibility for your actions is something that comes with the territory of being responsible enough to drink.*

*—Emily Pries, UI alumna*

The crashes of the two earliest known birdmen—hundreds of miles and a century apart—were blamed on the lack of a working tail. In 875 A.D., with a horde watching in Moorish Spain, the respected physician Abbas ibn-Firnas covered his body with buzzard feathers,

climbed a high wall, and raised a pair of wings. Though he is said to have glided some distance, he smashed to the ground and broke his back. Chronicling ibn-Firnas' attempt, a sympathetic critic wrote that "not knowing that birds when they alight come down upon their tails, he forgot to provide himself with one."

Sometime between 1000 and 1010 A.D., the roguish flight of jackdaws, which glided from old church towers, captured the imagination of a young Benedictine monk. Eilmer of Malmesbury had to try for himself. He outfitted himself with feathered wings, both for his arms and feet, and climbed to the top of Malmesbury Abbey. With a careful swoop away from the tower, Eilmer found himself in an uncontrolled glide. Over 600 feet passed below him before a combination of wind and panic sent him hurtling to the ground. He broke both legs and remained crippled for the rest of his life. Because there is strong evidence of his glide, Eilmer is considered by some to be mankind's earliest aviator. A stained-glass portrait of him, holding a model pair of wings, glows in the abbey today. Though it is only remotely possible that Eilmer could have heard of ibn-Firnas' tailless flight, "he himself used to say," wrote a historian from the abbey, "that the cause of his failure was his forgetting to put a tail on the back part."

Until Joe died the next morning, the hospital did not allow his friends to see him. When Joe's parents arrived after a four-hour drive of petrified silence, the doctor told them their son was in pain. "Then yes," they said, and the machines were turned off. Twenty minutes later, nurses wiped the blood from his ears, and Joe's friends, more than fifty, came to see him there in the bed, his face swollen and blue, a sheaf of his blond curls shaved away.

Five hundred years after Eilmer's glide, an Italian named John Damian built wings and covered them in feathers. Touting his upcoming flight, he promised to flap from Scotland to France. From the wall of Stirling Castle, Damian leaped—and plunged straight down into a dung heap. To everyone, the cause of his failure was obvious: When making his wings, he had irresponsibly mixed in chicken feathers. With wings made purely of eagle feathers, he would have soared all the way to Paris.

Alcohol plays a role in 1,700 student deaths nationwide every year, an anti-college-drinking advocate told the *Daily Iowan*.

I know that drunken students too often fall from balconies. My next-door neighbor went away to college and fell. My sister's freshman-year roommate fell. The week after Joe, another boy from Minnesota fell.

But I also know that sometimes, the balconies themselves fall.

"I have flown like a bird for more than three miles," wrote Léo Valentin in the last chapter of his 1955 memoir. "That's not a bad beginning."

Valentin had mastered parachuting in the 1930s, when it was a brand-new experiment in the French military. In his memoir, he wrote that as a boy he was restless. The only thing that kept him still was the sight of wheeling buzzards and flapping storks. Most of his comrades expected that Valentin's first parachute jump would kill him. It was 1938, and he was nineteen years old.

"I clutched onto my liftwebs like grim death, probably by a reflex against falling, and looked up at the great white dome swaying gently against the blue sky. How beautiful it was! Then I glanced at my body. It was mine all right and I was intact. I felt I wanted to cry like a child for the very joy of being alive."

Léo Valentin pioneered skydiving as a sport. When parachutists still cannonballed head-first out of planes to endure violent tumbles, he invented the belly-down, spread-eagle position that is now fundamental for a stable dive. His philosophy: "Prudence! Prudence! The hour is not yet come when a lone man can afford to dream as he wanders through the sky."

Now that parachutes had been perfected, Valentin wrote, "men rather than material had to be held responsible for accidents. How many have I seen kill themselves whom a little restraint or care would have saved? But how can you prevent some people from wanting to play the gallery?"

Valentin described a risky trick called a death glide, in which a parachutist pulls down his rigging lines until his head is just beneath the silk. This speeds up his descent, providing a high until he releases the lines, allowing the canopy to belly again. One day, a good friend and war hero Valentin called "B" felt the urge to enter a death glide. He yanked down his parachute and, already nearing the

earth, sailed downward at 100 miles an hour. Imagine his thrill—the purity of it. For some recovering drug addicts, skydiving is the only high as powerful as the one they’ve given up. In some cases, doctors recommend it.

When B released his rigging lines, he found himself entangled in them. He died when he hit the ground.

“B, one of the aces of the sky battalions, had killed himself by imprudence,” Valentin wrote. “From each death, no matter how cruelly it affected us, we could not help but draw a conclusion.”

Léo Valentin carefully calculated his risks. “I am neither a madman nor an eccentric,” he wrote. “I feel no inclination to push up daisies prematurely. Love of life is precisely one of the things I have learned from my profession. To fold my ’chute, to check my instruments, to drop correctly, to open at the right time, that is serious business. A successful number is the result of discipline and not of futile daring and childish capers. All circus folk from the lion tamer to the juggler, from the bare-back rider to the trapeze artist, will tell you the same thing. The risk is great enough when a pure accident is still possible.”

In other words, living is dangerous. There are certain risks we accept.

In high school, and in his first year of college, Joe kept his hair short and his mouth closed. He tried not to be noticed. He took no risks. The last year of his life must have been terrifying: He relaxed into loose jeans. He developed a playful smirk in the shadow of his wide-brimmed hats. He grew a halo of curls, trying for the ’fro his father once had. He began to kiss.

“One day,” Valentin remembered, “one of the boys decided to let himself drop from the top of a tree with a blanket attached by four ropes to his belt as his only parachute. The result was obvious. The air had no time to belly the blanket. We picked our friend up from the ground with a broken ankle on a stretcher of broken branches. He learned that day, and so did we (I still wonder why we let him carry out that ridiculous jump), that a blanket is not a parachute, and that it is not enough to launch yourself into space for you to glide. The laws of gravity are inescapable and ruthlessly punish anyone who is ignorant of them or tries to flout them—in any case, isn’t it an axiom

that ignorance of the law is no excuse? We knew perfectly well that a canopy opens only after a drop of between 210 to 250 feet. But we were only twenty and we were probably returning from a binge.”

Franz Reichelt, an Austrian-born tailor, dreamed of flying as he watched the pigeons in Paris. In early 1912, in the evenings after his shop closed, he worked at sewing a voluminous black overcoat. He gave it pounds and pounds of heavy fabric, and rigged the excess to fold in toward the body. He sewed in wooden stays. With its gentlemanly tailoring, the suit looked only somewhat oversized, with a strange, high-framed hood. Reichelt reasoned that the coat would give its wearer supernatural powers: if the man leaped into space, a fifteen-foot wing span would billow open, fill with rushing air, and allow its fragile cargo an elegant descent to earth.

More than four hundred people have jumped or fallen from the Eiffel Tower, most to their deaths, so it's hard to say whether Reichelt's moment would have been remembered if it hadn't been filmed.

In the first skipping frames of mote-flecked black-and-white, Reichelt modeled the overcoat. It draped like an elephant's hide. He was a small man, with black hair and a great scrub-brush of a handlebar moustache. His round ears stuck straight out. If it weren't for all the thick hair and whiskers, the thirty-three-year-old Reichelt would have looked like a boy. He made a slow turn, displaying the suit carefully, with measured shuffles of his little feet. After a full rotation, he faced the camera and paused until it occurred to him to salute the viewer. He removed his cap and made a shallow, dapper bow. I imagine that during his pause, Reichelt first comprehended that he had before him a chance for instant fame.

Reichelt had experimented with the overcoat from a height of ten or twelve feet. It is not clear what happened; perhaps, after leaping from a creek bridge or a rock wall, he blamed his hard landing on the fact that the coat needed more time to completely unfurl. Or maybe, forgetting that it would be quite possible for a human to survive a ten- or twelve-foot drop unaided, he wrongly attributed his survival to the coat.

Reichelt received permission to test his suit from the Eiffel Tower. His request said that he planned to make a “dummy drop”—certainly no live person would come down. On a cold February day, scores



of onlookers, mostly men—reporters, police, and officials—gathered beneath the tower. Imagine their excitement when Reichelt, having just modeled his suit for the camera, decided that he himself should test it.

Modern birdmen wear suits of nylon. When they spread their arms and extend their legs, webs of fabric stretch to form wings and a tail. Jumping from planes, they soar for miles and miles, over sea channels and forests, before deploying their parachutes. Despite—or perhaps because of—the fact that their sport has a 96 percent fatality rate, today’s birdmen are always looking for ways to improve their flying suits. This with the knowledge that there is only one way to test them.

Under the heavy overcoat, Reichelt began to climb. His figure, black and hulking, crept up 347 steps to the first level of the Eiffel Tower. This is the level just above the arches, 189 feet above the ground. But Reichelt began from an even higher spot. With reporters chattering, an official scurrying around his coat’s hem, and a nearby camera rolling, he climbed up onto a table, and then onto a chair atop the table, so he would be able to step easily onto the railing.

“See you soon,” he called to the men around him, cheerily enough.

Standing on the chair, Reichelt bounced his outstretched arms to unroll the fabric tucked beneath them. The section covering his lower body dropped in a bunch to his ankles, looking as if it would stretch between his feet to make a tail during flight. He shook his arms again, momentarily wrapping them across his chest, as if to shiver inside a blanket. He double-checked that the coat had unrolled, peeking beneath each arm, glancing down the sides of his legs, and turning to glimpse the hood behind his head. Then, he put one foot out onto the railing.

Immediately, Reichelt surged forward, only to pull back instinctively, like a child before his first dive. Then began a forty-second hesitation. Many times more, Reichelt rocked forward, only to abruptly come back. The early rocks are deep and risky. As they go on, though, they become gentle, barely perceptible. This is perhaps why so many who have viewed the film in the past century have said that in those forty seconds of hesitation, Reichelt came to believe that he would

die. And somehow, the force of that knowledge was so great, and the power of his situation was so intoxicating, that even though he remained firmly rooted, Reichelt could find no way out.

The dream that repeated the most for me was very simple. The landscape was always the same: a long, hot, blue sky, with a red-brown cliff superimposed. Sometimes a huge brown bird screamed in the sky, distant. I saw myself standing on the edge of the cliff. Small me, a person I recognized from the mirror. A little kid in pink corduroy pants and a purple zip-up sweatshirt. And my arms spread open, as if I expected to glide. Slowly, tilting forward, with a strange grace coupled with enormous, silent terror, my toes tipped down, and I felt myself plunging through the thin blue. Like most kids, I always woke up mid-plummet. And I felt some distance from the girl, even though I knew she was me. My consciousness was mostly outside of her; I watched her fall.

When I was an older child, I dreamed that I flew in a golden hot-air balloon. The balloon was just large enough to carry me. It floated me around my parents' kitchen, out onto the back deck where I could see in the sunlight my balloon's metallic richness, its depth and promise, its mythic power. I believed I was leaving the back yard, leaving the neighborhood, to rise up and away, over the poplar-tree spears and the peacock farms and into the northern hills. But suddenly, I was in my parents' garage, where the big doors were down, the lights were off, and only a little dusty sun came through dirty windows. My gold balloon bumped against the rafters.

In the end, the Austrian tailor did not leap. The foot still planted on the chair came forward, and, with his knees folding in defeat, Reichelt merely crumpled over the rail. The magnificent black overcoat wadded and sloughed over the edge.

A camera on the ground recorded Reichelt's five-second plummet. The coat streamed above his body. On impact, pieces of the earth exploded in a cloud. Men flocked toward him, lifting his body and carrying him efficiently away as soldiers do their war dead. In a moment's flash to the camera, Reichelt's face looks restful. There is no blood, and his eyes and mouth are gently closed.

Of the men remaining at the scene, one took a measuring stick and, in a manner quite scientific, centered it in the crater Reichelt's

body left in the sod. With thumb and forefinger, he demonstrated for the camera, against a backdrop of dark trousers and patent-leather shoes, a depth of nearly a foot.

Despite his mantra—"Prudence!"—Valentin still felt parachuting was too distant from genuine flight. "If only I could slow up my drop and prolong it. It would prolong my pleasure and I should be living more intensely."

In 1954, with a plane roaring away from his side, Léo Valentin did it. He flew. With the balsa-wood wings he had spent years engineering, he glided twice as far horizontally for every foot he dropped. It would seem that he went home right then to finish his memoir; the last chapter is full of fresh emotion. Fresh doubt, and a strange disappointment.

"I ought, of course, to be crazy with joy and shout from the rooftops that I am the first man in history to fly, but no, I do nothing of the kind. I have been so long on the trail that to have achieved the goal seems to be the most natural thing in the world. When the impossible has become the possible there's nothing more to say. That is why I am bringing this book to a close here."

Valentin sounds so sad when at last he flies, a human soaring bodily through the clouds. Night after night, he had nightmares about falling to his death.

In 1812, a Viennese watchmaker named Degen made large, light wings modeled after those of a bird. He said he would attempt to fly over the Tivoli gardens in Paris. Surrounded on the soil, he began a tumult of slow flaps that soon exhausted his breast muscles. As it became clear that he would not fly, his curious audience became enraged, collapsing onto him, crushing his wings, and trampling him to death.

Perhaps Degen knew then what Reichelt decided one hundred years later, not far away, as he hovered on the Eiffel Tower: It is best to die flying.

On May 21, 1956, a year after he published his book, Léo Valentin appeared at England's Speke Airfield with his latest pair of wings. For several years, he had been working to perfect the airflow over the wooden wings he wore, the way they released from his body

before landing, and his ability to continue flying while bringing his hand above his heart to pull his parachute's rip cord. Because his wings were too large to fit into a smaller aircraft, a cargo plane brought him up, probably to 9,000 feet, in a slow climb.

It was a stifling day. Flies landed on children's ice cream, men wiped sweat from their foreheads, and women fanned their faces as they waited to see the veteran diver billed as The Bird Man.

Soon Valentin appeared, a black speck in the sky. A second later, a woman screamed.

The Bird Man was not flying. His parachute ribboned above him.

Some mothers grabbed their children and turned them away. A knot of men shooed a cluster of boys who had been watching from a bright green wheat crop just outside the airfield. The men looked up, shading their eyes from the sun. This was where he would fall.

The Bird Man made a shape in the wheat like a fallen eagle: face down, legs back, beautiful wings spread. The men turned him over to find no blood, no gruesome injury. Instead, the inkling of a smile held his lips.

No one knows for certain what happened, but the theory is this: As Valentin stepped from the aircraft, a strong gust wrenched one of his wings, causing it to hit the plane. With the wing mangled, Valentin could not glide. Perhaps the wings also would not release from his body, as they were designed to do. Or perhaps they were such new wings, and so smooth and light and exquisite, that he could not bear to let them smash down from such a height. Valentin deployed his parachute, but it caught on his broken wing. He released his reserve, and it snarled too.

Recently, I dreamed of a library full of lions, ancient maps, fantasy and myths. Thick red velvet curtains flanked tall, cathedral windows, and amber light illuminated endless mahogany bookshelves. Though the library seemed to have a ceiling, it was impossibly high. There creaked and flapped all of the old flying machines: ghastly kites and child's-toy airscrews from ancient China; Foolish King Kavus with eagles tied to his throne; the *Machine novae*, Fausto Veranzio's 17th-century cone-shaped parachute; Léonardo DaVinci's *ornithopter* with a pedaling man beneath its propeller; Francesco Lana's flying galleon, equipped with oars and sails; Samuel Langley's goliath aerodrome; and, drifting tranquilly, my gold balloon.

Around the same time, I dreamed of a snowy night when I teetered in a car atop a high cliff over black seas. I tried to remain calm, carefully reversing the car—my mother’s old black Volkswagen Beetle—and gently giving it gas. But forward it slipped. I tried again, wanting desperately not to be a fool, not to leap out of the car in an unnecessary panic. I could handle this. I needed to keep a cool head and try again, relying on the machine to perform its function. On my third effort, though, the car slid forward again. This was it. There was a motionless instant of horrible equilibrium, and then we fell. In the air, the car disappeared. It was just me, plunging breathlessly. This time, instead of watching from a vantage point, I was inside myself. I knew my thoughts. At first, I remained stubbornly practical. I looked over what was happening. *I’m falling. I’m going to die. This is the moment when you know you’re going to die.* The next thing I did, surprising myself, was to give a sudden mental chuckle and a self-deprecating roll of the eyes—*I can’t believe this!* My responses all brave, calm, socially acceptable. And still more sense: *Make something meaningful of this last moment. Use it!* Here my reasonableness turned to passion. I saw my husband’s face, and my thoughts screamed: *I love you!* Then my family—just my parents, brother, and sister: *I love you all!*

I lost consciousness then. No one would ever know what I’d thought. But there is the poetry, the tragedy, of what comes at the end: no one knows what you do.

I wake up often in the middle of the night, terrified, knowing throughout my being that I will die. Despite all of the work I do to repress this, I know my own temporariness. If I did not love, and were not loved, this wouldn’t matter. Love makes death powerful. I hear my husband breathing beside me, and I don’t want him to know that I will someday be gone.

Only in these moments do I know that Joe is really dead. After all, I had said goodbye to him. I expected that like most of my students, he would carry on in his career and never meet me again. But buried in night and dreams, I feel the creatureliness of a dying boy. I feel Joe’s death is true. It is an absence that I perceive in my flesh, in the sudden sour taste of my own blood and bones.

We are free to choose how to remember a man who throws caution to the wind.

In 1678, in the French town of Sablé, a locksmith named Jacob Besnier emerged from his shop with a flying apparatus: two poles with flappers on each end—something like kayak paddles, but with much larger panels. The poles were meant to pivot over the backs of the shoulders—one end held by the hands, the other end tied to the feet. In the air, a brisk walking motion was supposed to have flapped the panels, allowing a man to fly some distance from a height—perhaps down the street, or over a small river. Besnier tried his device from a stool, then from a table, then from a window. Finally, he leapt from a high garret.

Some believed a rumor that Besnier had flown over housetops. Others simply thought him an idiot. The man himself nursed broken bones and retired his machine. But one of Besnier's relatives, someone who perhaps inherited the same gladness, began carving a wooden sign. It was to hang in perpetuity from his inn: a calm-looking gentleman with a powder wig and nice square proportions, head slightly higher than feet, elegantly rowing an impossible widget through space.

The fastest bird on earth is the peregrine falcon. Peregrines, like bald eagles and red-tailed hawks, nest near the place in Minnesota where Joe now lies. They sail across the sky at one hundred miles an hour. But this is slow compared to their most famous maneuver, called a stoop. From high above, when a peregrine sees something he wants—usually a smaller bird in flight—he focuses. Cupping his wings, he tilts his head and falls into a dive. Plunging, the falcon reaches speeds up to 220 miles an hour. He usually aims perfectly, striking the object of his desire, killing it instantly. Then, exploding his wings, he catches himself.

Peregrines had become nearly extinct in North America by the time DDT was banned in 1972. Since then, the bird has steadily recovered. Still, his grip is fragile. Hunters shoot adults, predators seize hatchlings, eggs roll from cliffs. Unpracticed stoops kill sixty percent of juveniles. And exultant we watch, so magnificent is the fall.

Omar and his roommates knew that Joe's parents would come over. In the morning sun, on the last day of August, the boys took

water and soap and bleach down to the sidewalk. They scrubbed Joe's blood off the green handrail. They poured their strength into erasing the mark on the sidewalk, round and dark, as big as Joe's hair. They marveled, horrified, at how difficult it was to remove. Three months later, on a rainy November afternoon, the stain was still there.

If passing students knew what it was, and professors and citizens, they might like to put up a little cross there, as a warning to others.

But *Here flew Joe*, I want a bronze plaque to say, or a stained-glass window, or a soaring obelisk.