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STEVEN PATTERSON

Aground and Aloft

I fly in deep river canyons and come to rest where flat land is scarce. My day is a hopscotch route, up and down, up and down. For the dwellers of remote outposts I am a taxi service, mail carrier and delivery van. On occasion I am called on to be an ambulance driver, an emergency outlet arcing over the granite peaks. Once I have been a hearse of last resort, bearing out the body of a drowned river runner as cargo in the tail, cinched up tight in his sleeping bag. But these are details that don't change my waking day. I attend to the variables around me: the steep slopes, the jutting trees, updrafts and crosswinds and density altitude. My importance doesn't lie in what I carry or where I go. I am responsible for my skill with the yoke, a knowledge of flaps and throttle, an eye for the condition of the air. It is my task to settle the machine to the earth in impossible places, like alighting at the bottom of a soup bowl.

I make runs out of Cascade, where I work for Chimp Atherton. His name is on the hangar and the planes. My husband, Ron, and I hired on eighteen years ago, when it was just the three of us. Today there are four pilots, Chimp not included, as well as two mechanics and three women who run the office and take radio calls. Now, in the summer, is our busiest season. Every pilot and every plane will work steady through until the aspen groves turn yellow and quaky. Then we will bolt skis to a couple of the Cessnas and deliver groceries and mail to some of the ranches that get snowed-in. But the work is slower in winter. Two of the summer pilots head down to Arizona and run a flight school, and then appear again when the rivers here are high with snowmelt.

I prefer the taxi and supply flights, ferrying cargo around, traveling routes I can see in my sleep. Chimp likes some of the fancy flying, chartering for the Forest Service Aerial Fire Attack when the ridges start to burn. Powell, a moustache with a man attached, likes to get up there and tool around for hours, so he volunteers for the Fish and Wildlife trips to monitor gray wolves they have marked with radio collars. I'm not much for adventure these days, though.

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When I go up I want to know exactly when I'm coming down again. I want to picture the landing before I ever take off.

It has been a little more than eight months since my husband's plane went down in a distant valley. No one was there to watch it happen. Civilians have some fancy notion about airplanes always going off the radar, a scenario of instant alarm and emergency protocols. But wilderness flying does without such gadgetry, which is expensive and often useless for the terrain. We rely instead on a system of self-reporting, and trouble is usually confirmed by absence. After Ron was two hours overdue and no one could raise him on the radio, the rest of us took off in a little buzzing squadron and traveled his planned route back to his departure point. There was no evidence of him or the plane that day, nothing so halting as a smoke plume. It would have been better to have known before the sun dropped, before we all had to come in for unwanted landings and I paced the hangar all night, throwing wrenches against the metal siding when things got too quiet. That would have been a cleaner cut, I think, something easier to gather and repair. But it was late the next afternoon when a Forest Service helicopter spotted the wreckage, and the day after that when I could finally view it for myself.

I have not been in the air since. Four weeks afterwards I drove myself to Mexico with the dogs on the mattress in the back of the VW. It was an annual trip Ron and I made for more than a decade, a couple of months we sought away from the snow and the engine whine. We hadn't managed to get there in a couple of years, but suddenly it was where I needed to be. We had seasonal friends on the beaches, ones outside the fraternity of flight, who knew me as a good kayaker and a half-decent watercolor artist. I parked the van in various campgrounds for more than half the year, watching as the whales migrated south offshore and then north again before I had gone. I resisted for a while, but then I took their lead.

The early morning is bright and cool. Chimp is doing his preflight on the little Piper, running his hand along the struts. There are no big fires yet in early July, so he's flying a single, rich fisherman into the deep wilderness for the day. It's an expensive charter, and his passenger is in the parking lot wearing about a thousand dollars worth of Orvis gear and practice-casting with a beautiful cane rod. When Chimp sees me on the tarmac he comes over.

“It’s going to be nice air this morning, Wayva,” he says. “But this afternoon could get squirrelly.”

“Well, Chimp. You just summed up most of the summer season. Any other wicked insights you feel like sharing?”

“Wayva,” he frowns. He puts one hand on my shoulder and dips his head to indicate that he’s getting personal. “I feel like it’s right to have these chats as you ease back in.”

“You know it’s nothing but babytalking me, Chimp. If you trust me, you’ll let me scout my own air.”

He removes his hand. “If I didn’t trust you, you wouldn’t be flying my plane.”

“Fair enough,” I say.

He points me to the red Cessna. “You’ll take out the 206 today. You’ve got some passengers for Moose Creek, and also some gear for that river outfitter on the Middle Fork.”

I nod. “You’re worrying for no reason,” I tell him. “I feel ready. Ready steady.”

My breath draws short today as I fly. I haven’t been up in months and the sight from this altitude is as much strange as familiar. I remember the details of the setting but for some reason not the shock of its dimensions. Out the cockpit window the landscape is a series of ranges that recede into the haze. Some high spots are bare scars of rock above a slope of tumbling scree; others bristle with firs like the tight teeth of a comb. High, white fields of snow adhere to many northern slopes, and below them the countless little lakes that cup the runoff, too many to be named. The slanting morning sun lights up the ridges but leaves the canyon bottoms dark in shadow. It makes the repetition even more obvious: a low spot for every high one, a fall for every rise.

I am probably the only woman pilot in the air at this moment well beyond each visible horizon. That’s because mountain air is ruled by men. Fathers pass the particular knowledge to sons. The only female evidence tends to be the voices on the radio, beaming a signal out of the home fields in Salmon or Stanley or Hamilton. I learned from Ron, sitting beside him for years like a trucker’s wife, one short haul after another into the wilderness. I had my license when we met, but I wasn’t fit for the backcountry, only for the long, paved, civilized strips. He taught me the physics, and most

especially he gave me the experience. It's the experience that is crucial, for practice counts most when returning to the earth in the mountains. Each landing demands a singular approach, often blind, and so a pilot relies on the faith of precise, visual recall.

I remember once bringing the plane down on a particularly difficult strip for the first time. I had timed the drop perfectly and worked the throttle like a pro, so the wheels hit the ground like I had just rolled off a ramp. I turned and grinned at Ron, who stared straight ahead and nodded at the passing ground. It was a display of approval—no lapse in technique he could criticize. I turned back and watched a little rise approach. I knew that at the top of it the strip doglegged, so I waited and then turned the wheel right. The runway went left. We bounced through rock and sagebrush, and then I turned back to correct too hard and tilted the plane so that the wingtip scraped before we bounced back hard on all wheels. He was responsible for the plane and its damage, and his disappointment was deep. The full measure of it was demonstrated when he did not allow me to fly back out. I wouldn't have wanted to, but a less angry pilot would have insisted it upon me as a penance and a timely lesson of terra firma. He let me out of it, something I preferred at the time but which I learned to view as a blunt delivery of mistrust. I worked hard to never earn that penalty again, although I failed in the end.

A sun low in the eastern sky is calming to a pilot, because morning air is the best for flying in the backcountry. It is cool and relatively still, just the kind of dense and stable platform a plane needs for proper lift. After about 10 a.m. the heat of the day starts to tear the air apart. Pilots learn the science that is involved: solar and orographic influence, diurnal reactions. We know that everything starts to move invisibly according to the topography: in updrafts, downdrafts, flowing through river canyons or whipping across them. Canyons that meet may cause a convergence effect. Canyons that narrow are likely to produce a Venturi effect. Warm, dry air lifting up the steep slopes meets cool, moist air at higher altitudes, and thunderstorms bloom. This is all precise, studied data. But for canyon flying it is meant to be cautionary and superfluous. A wilderness pilot knows to avoid flights from late morning to late afternoon, when all the facts describe air that is essentially unknowable.

Luck starts to count for something during those hours, and relying on luck at all is a sure sign that the pilot has erred.

The three passengers in the back are Forest Service, kids nearly. They won't see a road for weeks where they're going, and they have obviously spent their last night in town getting ready for the absence, toasting their fortune with cheap beer. All of them are sleeping it off after having to make this early flight. It's a common ceremony, something I see every summer. They want one last, long taste before the mountains devour them. Now they'll join up with a trail crew in the Wilderness Area for a long stint without luxury. Wilderness designation prohibits anything mechanized or motorized, so while some of their softer counterparts elsewhere clear timber with chainsaws, they go at it with axes and crosscuts. They will ache in their tents every night from the strain. But I know it's something these boys choose. They're alike—they believe in the superiority of labor.

They remind me of my son, Henry. He used to have the same kind of stubble under his lower lip as one of these boys, the same languid comfort of his muscles. From childhood, Henry always preferred a path going uphill. He built radios from kits instead of buying them made. He chose summer trail work instead of a job back in town and nights at the drive-in. Ron and I wanted to shake him of this idea at first, to make his life an easier one. But we got to realize the earnestness it came from. Henry wanted to struggle so he could rest in comfort, so he could know his idleness was deserved. I'm not sure where he got this strength. It's not something I see in myself.

I see the first stop of the day and start to circle so I can survey for air traffic and animals on the ground, obstacles of any kind. Indian Creek is a USFS air strip on the Middle Fork of the Salmon, which is busy with commercial float trips in the summer. There are tie-downs at one end of the strip but little else in the way of services or facilities. The runway is bi-directional, something not common in the backcountry. An upstream landing is indicated in the morning when a typical down-canyon flow of cool air provides a headwind. I breathe hard before I let us start to fall.

The passengers help me unload two large, heavy coolers sealed with tape. The boat I am supposed to meet has not arrived, so we haul everything to the edge of the meadow the strip is carved in, above

the river and a small beach. The air is still chilly and everything is wet with dew. We sit on the coolers and wait.

"This is my last year on the trails," one of the boys says to me.

"Starting to drag ass?" I ask.

He snorts like I've insulted him. "I'm going to train with the fire crew out of McCall. Next year I'll be smokejumping."

Another boy laughs. "We call him 'Smoker' in camp, but that's on account of how powerful his farts are."

"Don't start with that shit." The first boy shakes his head. "When I'm gone, you'll remember sucking my fumes as the closest to greatness you ever got."

The third boy looks at me. "Don't mind him. He's high on his own gas."

This really gets the first one going. "Come again? I'm sorry; I forgot you can't even come once. You need to stretch and shellac it to keep it up."

"At least I got prospects, man. You couldn't get lucky if your sister took food stamps," says the third one.

"The only action either of you ever saw was a wet sock you balled up in your hand," says the second.

The three of them laugh softly, shaking their shoulders. Then suddenly in my presence they are quiet and embarrassed, looking at the trees or up the river. I know they think they've crossed a line with me, gotten too rough. I don't tell them, but I enjoy the chest-out bluffing of men. It reminds me of Ron and Henry giving each other soft thumps like this, father and son jabbing and dodging. For a moment it makes me feel warm.

After about fifteen minutes the raft comes into view. We watch it float toward us. The guide strains at the oars to bring it into the beach, hops out and tugs it with a tow line, then anchors the rope with a heavy rock. He comes up the beach smiling.

"Waiting long?" he asks.

"I shouldn't be waiting at all," I say. "I need to keep moving while I've got the weather."

"Sorry. You could have left the stuff and gone," he says, trying to apologize.

"I only get paid if I make sure you get it. Now you got it."

He pulls off the tape and checks the supplies. The coolers are filled with tubs of ice cream, packages of hot dogs and buns, con-

tainers of potato salad. Stashed on the side are several packages of sparklers, and I realize for the first time that today is the 4th of July, and these are the celebration provisions. I'm not sure how I forgot.

"We want to do it right for the guests," the guide says. "It'll be a fine surprise at camp tonight."

"Nice touch," I say.

The boys help him load the coolers on the raft while I untie the plane. I think of the boaters still around the fire upstream, sipping their coffee before the thrill of the day's rapids, maybe unaware that one of their guides has slipped out early on this secret mission, certainly unaware of me and my cargo. I know I can take off downstream and they will never know I was here. But safety suggests that I do not depart with a tailwind. So I will end up buzzing over their heads at relatively low altitude, and they will tip back their heads and stare. The cleverer among them may notice the missing boatman and figure out the surprise before they even make camp. This is something I cannot help.

If you spend enough time in a cockpit, the noise of a single piston engine seems at times to disappear. These are the moments when every setting is correct for the circumstance. You get a feeling like you're soaring on your own power, aloft and alone. Some pilots get great pleasure out of these spells of reflex and bliss. I've always been taught they are among the most dangerous occasions. If you get out of your head that means the plane is flying you. But a pilot must always fly the plane, every second. An aircraft will obey the air and its own physics. A pilot is there to control these same things, modify and shape them. Flying is all intention and guile, steering the elements. It is not a surrender to the wind. That's what kites do, and kites will crash as often as they ascend.

Ron always liked to tell me this. We honeymooned in a little C180, and he whispered to me about stall speed and turbulence. I would nuzzle him at night, camped under the outstretched wing, and he would name the forces that could pluck me from the sky. He always identified inattention as the foremost, the gravest sin. He wanted badly for me to respect the machines and the skies, to cherish the beauty of the labor of flight, and fear nothing but my own lack. If I strayed, I would not escape the eventual consequence: I would meet

the ground and augur in. "Propellers scoop rotten post holes," he said. "But they dig a pretty good grave." The way he squeezed my hand made it more tender than our vows.

Last summer Ron started to lapse. He began talking of flying as having transcendence, making it a mystical act. When he went up, he said, he could feel himself slip from his earthbound weight. A man doesn't change his beliefs like that without a reason, and I knew the reason was me. He knew that such talk would terrify me, having taught me the fear himself. We argued every morning before we took off in different directions, and each night he would touch back down with a fierce smile. Sometimes I was there to see it aimed at me, a jab for my transgressions. And sometimes I was still out, in a cabin in a steep river canyon, sitting on the edge of another man's bed, and I could feel that smile burn like hot iron in my chest.

He knew about the affair but we didn't talk about it, allowing it instead to follow us around like a stray dog. It glided through canyons and over ridge tops with us, breathing on our necks with a stale heat. When I caught a transmission of his on the radio I could hear the strain of its company in his voice. He never addressed me directly any more, only referred to me as a bothersome idea that wouldn't focus entirely or disappear either.

"Canyon traffic," he would say, "be advised. Squalls in a ten-mile line eastbound above Elk City. Pilots, wives and swindlers, beware. Over."

I enter the Selway River Canyon from the west a few miles above Selway Falls. This is the approach for Moose Creek, a big Forest Service strip with a ranger station and enough room to accommodate the big DC-3s for fire control. I take care not to drag the plane in on a slow, mushing approach, because this is where the winds of two converging canyons meet, making them unpredictable. I don't want to be surprised this close to the trees.

The ranger station at Moose Creek has been around since the twenties. The current ranger, Dino, has been stationed for six years, and I've known him since the beginning. He is a gruff but decent man in his forties, making him still younger than me, even though he's got the crust of an old-timer.

I walk from the plane to the station, leaving the boys with a quick farewell to grab their own gear and hustle on to find their crew. Dino is already walking out to meet me, presumably since he recognized Chimp's plane.

"Come out to pester the Feds, have you?" he asks.

"You're spending my taxes out here, Dino. I wanted to check if you were mowing the grass."

"You look good, Wayva." He takes my hand for a gentle shake, but we do not embrace. It's a disrespect he would not show any pilot.

"And you look like you combed your hair with a rock," I tell him.

"Are you on schedule?" he asks. "Can you have a cup of coffee?"

We head for the oldest building, the one called the "Honeymoon Cabin," which serves as a cookhouse during fire season. A few from the fire and trail crews are still eating breakfast, so we carry our cups outside to a picnic table.

"You're taking it easy this year," he says. "We usually see you by April."

I nod at the coffee. "I spent a lot of the winter down on the beach in Baja in the van. I've been back only about six weeks, looking things over at the house."

"I guess we haven't talked since the memorial service."

"That sounds right," I say.

He takes a long breath. "I hope you won't mind me telling you again how sorry I am."

"I'm pretty used to it," I say. "It's about the only thing I hear these days."

He stops breathing like I've hooked him in the gut. "I can't know how it is for you, Wayva. All I know is Ron was a good friend to a lot of people. And Henry was a fine, strong boy."

I let him off the hook like I am accustomed now. "I appreciate that, Dino. It means something coming from you."

"It's true." He grins with relief. "Hard to take losing the good ones."

"Everyone's good to someone, don't you think?"

"I don't know," he says. "The fire guy they got out here this summer, the crew chief, he's a pretty useless specimen. Hard and mean. He could just as well get caught in a big burn and end up as nothing

but a little smoking grease. I'm pretty certain no one around here would miss a step."

"That's the way it is with those firefighting bastards, isn't it? They breathe so much smoke some of them start spitting it."

"Yeah," he says. We've drifted off the centerline of the conversation and he doesn't know how to angle back. I don't feel like helping him right now.

I toss what's left of the coffee. "I'd better get up and out of here before I get stuck."

"Sure, I understand." He takes my cup and we head for the plane. "I'm glad to see you again. I'm glad you're in the air. It would make Ron and Henry proud, I think."

"You know," I say, "people keep telling me that, too. Truth is, being back up makes me feel defiant. I don't know why, but it seems like their air I'm trespassing in."

He stops and looks at me as I open the cockpit door, his mouth downturned just a bit. "Don't believe that."

"I can't help it." I climb into the seat and latch the door behind me. Dino's still there holding out the two coffee cups. I grin and slide open the window. "You want to know what funny feels like? It's being scolded by dead men for rising."

Henry never showed any zeal for serious flying. He had his license and about 100 hours of flight time in open country, but he didn't desire the demanding training for the wilderness. This may seem like a heartbreak for two formidable prop-head parents, but the boy was so sweet about it that it was impossible to be upset. He would ride co-pilot with Ron or me once or twice nearly every week of his life. When he turned eighteen and spent summers on the trail crews he would travel in and out with one of us every time. For years we had him wear the cockpit headphones and we would narrate the entire trip as we went—every throttle adjustment, every landscape feature that might suggest airflow—spelling out the ether, trying to train him to be an expert before he ever took the yoke. Not once did that boy ever roll his eyes sideways at me or his father, not that I saw. He held his head up in a serious fashion and scanned the terrain, nodded at our comments, smiled at our bad jokes. He must have known for years before we did that ours was a family trade he would not follow, but he never complained to us or took up an angry

defense of his liberty, claiming his father and I were encroaching. He decided to go along, to give us that comfort which parents are so often denied. And I never expressed to him how full that made my heart, that gift of tolerance for his hardheaded folks. I think about that all the time, and sometimes I can convince myself that a sensitive boy like Henry would have known without my saying.

In the last couple of months before the crash I lost that boy to Ron. I deserved it. Everyone knew about my affair. The unavoidable thing about the wilderness is that for all the vast acreage the human community is tiny. There are only a few dozen inhabited lodges and ranches, a handful of Forest Service posts. Communication is by a couple of radio frequencies, party-line fashion. The same small batch of pilots provisions everyone. So while distances are great, in some ways the isolation is an illusion. Secrets are hard to keep in the mountains.

Ron moved out of the house and rented another in Cascade, and Henry went with him. I had not felt much love for Ron in many years, and he knew it, even though it pained him. So my infidelity was not so much a shock as it was a confirmation of failure for him. It was dreadful, but it was not unexpected. For Henry, though, I believe that revelation tainted me. I think of the change as something biological. I know how babies respond to the scent of their mother—it is pacifying and alluring, something I imagine as sweet like cream. You know how it works when you cradle an infant, or a bawling six-year-old burrows his face into your neck and you rock him to comfort. The very fragrance of your skin is a bond. I don't think this ever really leaves us, even though we grow to claim reason over instinct. I believe that afterwards, when everybody in town knew my secret and Henry had to face me, attentive to my sin, that scent spoiled. From the way his eyes watered I think I had turned tinny and bitter. At the time of the crash he hadn't spoken to me in three weeks.

A few miles behind me is the spot their plane went down. I need to circle back in the wide part of the canyon now if I am to align a safe approach. What I remember—the thing I try and focus on—is that turn radius and airspeed are proportional, and understanding this relationship is crucial for a backcountry pilot. I wonder—would it help me now to remember my son's easy laugh instead? It could fill my head if I let it. Or should I try and soothe myself with the

calculation that an airspeed of 130 knots in a 30-degree bank would present a turn radius of 2599 feet? Maybe the latter, since the canyon here is less than a mile wide. At 70 knots I could lower my turn radius to 753 feet, keeping the canyon walls away from me but also dropping the engine RPMS to roughly the pitch that comprised Ron's one-note singing voice, the entirely unapologetic drone he massacred radio tunes with. To avoid that I think I'll keep some of my speed and turn more sharply to compensate, even knowing that exceeding a medium bank can be disorienting without a visual horizon, and the impulse to "bank and yank" is generally a hazardous one. I am well aware that passengers tend not to appreciate steep turns, particularly in constricted terrain, and a good pilot always considers the comfort of travelers in any calculations. But what is inescapable is that I am the only traveler here, and I cannot make myself comfortable.

The strip comes into view. Now it is important to block out stray thoughts and concentrate. I remember, for example, that terrain and runway gradient usually dictate landing upstream, but also that this instance is an exception. Shearer USFS is an unmanned airport on the Selway. At an elevation of 2634 feet... maybe it's 2364... the strip lies deep in a narrow river canyon. An upstream landing, designated runway 36, is not advised—this heading is best suited for departures. Inexperienced pilots are urged to use this strip for emergencies only, at which time a downstream landing is recommended. I can't seem to remember that number designation, but that's not crucial. Pilots should note that a high ridge presents a formidable obstacle as the aircraft descends. After clearing the ridge, pilots are advised that a 4:1 descent slope is required to make the field with adequate braking distance. Depending on climatic conditions and the aircraft weight, once a pilot is committed to this landing there is often no go-around option. Planning and preparation for such a landing is essential.

I am alone on the ground. Shearer is the kind of strip that sees one or two aircraft a day in the summer. There are two cabins off in the trees, but they are almost always empty since the Forest Service lost the bulk of its budget. A private lodge lies a couple of miles downstream, but no one is likely to show up for a visit. The caretakers there are busy holding back the wilderness, and the

guests have paid a wad of cash to fall off the map. In any case, I'm heading upstream, toward the ridge I had to clear on approach. Last October, Ron, with Henry beside him, wrecked at full speed into that rocky slope. The last time I flew into the mountains was to circle that spot, peering down two days later at that impossibly small jumble of metal debris. There was hardly a scar or a scorch in evidence. It was almost as if the crash had happened silently and without violence, my husband and son just absorbed into the hill. I could not put my plane down. I just looped and looped until finally my gauges told me I needed to return home.

It's late morning now and the chill has been wrung from the air. I stuff my jacket in the plane. The trail is easy to find in the short grass of the runway, so I get on it. There is no worry of being on the wrong path—along this part of the river there is only one. It goes upstream and down, close to the banks. At some points there is rockfall that narrows the canyon, so the river rushes only a few feet away.

I get to a wide, sandy beach and stop. There was a single time that I traveled this exact trail with my two men in the lead. Henry was eight or nine years old. We landed at the airstrip early on a Saturday morning for a weekend of air camping. In the afternoon we hiked upriver to the beach to swim and fish. Ron must have been fooling with a fly rod, because Henry and I were alone. He took me down to the end of the beach where a great, flat slab of granite as big as a box trailer jutted into the water. Henry stood looking out, and then he turned to me. He took one big step backwards.

"Tell me when to stop," he said.

"Alright. But take smaller steps."

He put his left toes behind his right heel. "How about now?" he asked.

"You're fine," I said.

He measured another pace with his other foot. "Okay?" he asked.

I watched the rushing stream, its fast white water, and then I looked back at my son's feet. "Still a ways to go."

He smiled and stepped again. "I'm going."

It may seem astonishing that I did not feel a single bead of fear rising from my belly. Some might question my fitness as a mother for letting the game go on. I can only describe the security I felt at

the time. Henry's gaze was on me straight as a clothesline. I spotted for him; he listened, and moved with great care. Our belief in each other was complete. The sense of trust I felt was as invulnerable as I have ever shared, stronger even than with bird dogs and airplane mechanics. "Don't worry," I told him, until his left heel dangled in space.

By the time I am below the ridge I cannot see it. I know I need to find a way up. The best I can detect is a game trail that zigzags up the hill, so I follow it. In a little while I am back in the trees, and although I can see where I want to go it takes me some time to reckon the right approach. The game trail is gone, and I work through the brush, scratching my bare arms. The sun now is straight overhead, and I start to wish I'd brought some water for the trip, or at least dunked in the river before I started to climb.

After another half-hour and a few missteps I make it to a saddleback ridge above the crash site. It's too steep to descend without ropes, and I cannot see any evidence of the collision. But there on the ridge, farther out, are heavy stones that have been stacked into a cairn. I am surprised that no one spoke of it to me. I suppose, though, that Ron had enough friends who I haven't contacted since last autumn that this could pass untold.

The top rock has what looks like an "x" chipped into it. But I can see the two little extra marks angling from the bottom of one axis, making a tail. I lift the rock with its little flying petroglyph so I can trace the lines with my finger. A piece of metal is resting on a flat base beneath. Someone has fashioned a small capsule from two rifle shells crimped and fitted together. I lay the capstone at my feet and reach back up to pull the shells apart—a roll of paper slides out. Unfurled it reads, "Straighten up and fly right." It's pilot humor. For men who tend to live dead-serious lives, a fatal accident can rattle some of them badly enough to make nervous jokes. I read the note and it doesn't strike me as unbefitting. Someone made this trip, carried and placed these heavy stones, and scrawled out this anxious plea. It's a better tribute than I have so far managed.

One thing I am certain of is that I should not be in the air at this moment. At just after 3 p.m., I am in some of the worst chop of the day. The way the Cessna is bouncing around is proof enough of this.

I stayed on that ridge for another hour, meaning to say something to my men. I didn't come with anything prepared; I thought something would occur to me when I stood in that high, rocky place. It did not. I had soaring thoughts but a mouth full of cotton, maybe because I was so parched. By the time I made it back to the plane I was dizzy from my thirst.

Ron would be angry with me for flying. "It is foolhardiness to take such risks even for a good reason, and madness for no reason at all." I can hear him say this. Until this moment I have honored that concern. I have believed it to hold me up in the sky.

His own crash, I know, was not because of risk. We were in the air together that day, but in separate planes. I had four hunters and their gear with me and he had Henry and several hundred pounds of trophy elk. As I got to that spot in the canyon the cloud ceiling was starting to lower, but I did not radio to him. He was five minutes behind me and he would be able to care for himself. But evidently the clouds dropped and he did not turn to his instruments, not in time, and I think of this as a sense I must have dulled in him by my infidelity.

The insurance company settled the claim only a few weeks ago. I received a Notice of Benefits, still surprised Ron had not removed me as the beneficiary even after he knew. Maybe that's an odd concern, but I am inclined to view this inaction as a faith he did not break. Knowing this made it especially upsetting to hear in the weeks following the crash that the insurance investigators were pursuing a concern that it might have been the result of suicide, a despondency over our failed relationship. The claim was investigated for months, and I was deposed about my affair and the mental well being of my husband before I headed south. Eventually it was decided that the crash was not an intentional act, but an accidental death caused by a sudden shift in the weather. Even holding the insurance company's check, though, I knew I had stirred up the first of that blinding mist which ended up swallowing them both.

I swing across the canyon, trying to find the place where the aircraft can hold its loft the best. Both sides are bad, and I am left to fly the middle, which is where a pilot is taught never to be. It creates the greatest collision hazard, both with other aircraft and with surprises of terrain. In the middle, a pilot can move only marginally

to either extreme. There is no room for a sharp maneuver in an emergency.

I finally reach the confluence of Bear Creek, which indicates my approach. I am landing at the Marbury Bar Ranch, a private holding in the Wilderness Area. It requires a blind approach at treetop level and, when the runway appears only five seconds before touchdown, a sharp right bank. This airstrip is only advisable for pilots who have made the landing multiple times as a passenger before attempting it on their own. The aircraft must be centerweighted properly, and constant attention must be paid to airspeed to avoid a stall. Even experienced pilots will find their nerve tested here as they dip their gear to the grass.

I wait in the airplane until I see him approach. He's got an expression you could divide with a line from ear to ear: his mouth grins while his eyes frown. He moves with no great hurry from the little ranch compound.

The Marbury Bar is an old homestead from before the Wilderness Act, a tiny island of private property engulfed by the wide miles of canyonland. The ranch was donated to the state University, and for years it has been a center for wildlife research. That's what this man does—he tracks and studies mountain lions, alone out here for weeks at a stretch.

I knew him for a long time before I shared his bed. I can say with certainty that I never loved him or asked his love in return. But I required him for reasons I'm not sure I can explain. It was important that he was never a part of the aeronautic order, that imperative urge to keep airflow over the wings. He was a respite. For Ron, it was crucial that I pushed myself always to stay aloft. This man allowed me to come down. I think this is what I mean: I needed him for the comfort of the ground. I need him now.

When I meet him on the runway he clasps a hand behind my neck and pulls me to him. There is no kiss, only an embrace and then my chest starting to heave. The tears mash into his shirt.

Later, when I have calmed, and we are watching the clouds of Baetis hatches come out on the river as the light falls, I tell him I should use the radio.

I turn the dial to hear the hum and then wait to see if the channel is in use. There is nothing, so I lean into the microphone. "Cascade dispatch, come in please. Over."

After a few seconds, an electronic voice buzzes. "Cascade here. Over."

"Marbury Bar calling. Over."

There is a pause. "I read. Is that you, Wayva?"

"Yes. I'm checking in. Tell Chimp not to worry about his plane."

"Are you okay? Are you flying back tonight? Over."

I wait for several seconds. "Conditions are..." I don't know what I want to say. "Problems are nominal, but I have gone to ground. I am tied down for the night. Do you copy? I have landed. Over."

The fine crackle and whine of the radio waves leaping through all that air is soothing. I am at rest, and my voice can travel for me.