I often find myself praying on airplanes, and think that it might have something to do with how little there is to see when I look out the window.

In high school, we memorized “High Flight”—“Oh I have slipped the surly bonds of earth...”—but I can think of nowhere less ecstatic than sitting on a commercial flight. For all the times I have looked down at the tops of clouds, any simile that might describe them is already a cliché: ice cream, cotton fluff, frosting, sea spray. Right now we appear to be flying over cake frosting. Dingy gray cake frosting.

My work as a publisher often finds me coming home from exciting, stimulating places. Today, as I gaze at these drab cloud strata, I am thinking back to the professional conference I have just left, where I gave a well-received paper on how contemporary Irish writers have employed genealogy. Many of the scholars who attend this conference have become my good friends, and I am always sorry to leave them, even as I am looking forward to seeing my family and the routines of home again.

But in between, there is this flight. Several miles above the earth, I know not a living person on the airplane by his or her first name. There is no conversation beyond the superficial. Not a soul who knows my name can point at the sky or a map and say, “That’s where he is, right now.” A friend who had major bypass surgery told me that when he was in the hospital recovering, he kept wondering where he had been during the time he was hooked up to the heart-lung machine. In a small way, I wonder that every time I ride an airplane. We are lost to geography, and by extension, lost to the weave and embeddedness of our lives, up here.

The inevitable metaphors for such a state of isolation are common: a prison, a desert, and occasionally, when we look down at cities and countrysides arrayed below us like little kingdoms, a mountaintop. That may be why I can pray on airplanes: because the metaphors by which I think of flight are metaphors that lead to the historic locales of prayer.

* *

Today I am praying for my mother. When I get back to Minnesota, my wife will collect me at the airport, and at home I’ll do all the boring necessities of reentry. I will unpack my suitcase and throw a great knot of dirty socks and shirts into the washing machine. The dog will be exuberant in his welcome; the kids will be uninformative about what happened in my absence. I will sift through the mail and be astonished that I can be gone so long and get nothing but junk. And I will pick up the phone and call my mother. Her conversation will run like this: No news. Not a thing. I’m fine. Mine, while tinged with a little more youth and a few more activities, will hardly differ.

At eighty-five, my mother is in the closing years of her life. A simple actuarial table, or common sense, could tell me as much; yet it’s only lately that I’ve realized she is, at last, very old. She has not been a typical octogenarian; until this winter, she drove and cooked and was steady on her feet. If—or, occasionally, when—we stopped to think about it, everyone in my family would have known that her exceptional vigor was going to end, that it was like an Indian summer that has hung on far longer than predicted. In the past three months my mother has aged more than she did in the previous decade; a blood vessel burst in one eye, leaving her half blind. She is less steady on her feet,
and—most frightening—she loses the thread of a conversation, and has occasional passing periods of forgetfulness. She needs to start using a cane, too. My mother stumbled going into her condominium complex on Easter Sunday afternoon, and gashed her scalp—not badly, but enough to require a trip to the emergency room. One of those four-pronged aluminum devices, which plenty of women her age have been using for a long time, would give her stability and we would not have to worry so much about her falling; but my mother is not without her stubbornness. The reason she doesn't use such a cane is that she doesn't want to, and that explanation, for her, suffices.

It was when I came to sit with her in the ER this April that I first fully understood that what my mother wants to do and thinks she can do, and what her body and senses will allow her to do, are no longer on parallel tracks; I realized belatedly how tired she is, and how, with each successive loss of this or that capacity to age, her sense of joy erodes like a crumbling riverbank.

Here, three miles in the air, I start to make a list of the moments of my mother’s life. I ask myself, where—and by where, I mean, in what room, in what place—was she most my mother? In memory, I am trying to find irreducible moments of her love as a mother and my love for her as a son. Looking into the dark, dark glass of memory, and holding the memory of those we love, are acts that honor the lavish gift of their createdness. Recollection is, in this way, a sort of prayer.

I think of my mother at Lake L’Homme Dieu, where my family vacationed every summer for twenty-three years, think of her sitting on the edge of the white plank dock in her black swimsuit, dangling her feet in the water. Her glasses are off and I am more surprised by the furrow they’ve left on the bridge of her nose than by the sight of her eyes. I swim over and look at her toes, misshapen and callused from long years in shoes that never fit and flattened against one another. She wants me to chase away the minnows, then maybe she’ll wade.

I think of her on the night of January 5, 1974, the day my father died of a heart attack, crawling into the twin bed in which my father had always slept.

I think of my mother ironing, watching daytime TV in the next room on a day when I am home sick from school, in bed. A high-pressure infomercial, which I had seen before, is on: I hear it through the thin door, and as it blares I know my mother will be enthralled by the advertised product. A minute later she bursts into my room, running in place with a child’s excitement: “Jimmy, Jimmy, Jimmy!” she cries, “I want a Veg-O-Matic!!” And she and I both laugh at her silliness.

I think of her only ten years ago, when she was seventy-five, going to the funeral home for the wake of her best friend Bernadine; and I know, as we walk in, that this death has left a hole in her life greater than that of anyone except my father. My mother, always good at funerals, wears her sadness openly this night; tears show in her eyes the moment she walks into the room, and I love her for it.

I think of her serving green scrambled eggs on St. Patrick’s Day, while my father mixed pre-parade Bloody Marys for their friends.

I think of her at a reunion in 1976, in her hometown of Green Isle, Minnesota, population 450, with her cousin Dolly. Two women in their sixties, they hopped on a tractor-pulled hay wagon for a ride around the town. Dolly and my mother strike poses as beauty queens, waving and blowing kisses and laughing like the little girls they had been, growing up in the 1920’s.

When I try to locate her in a place—to find the exact spot that is my mother’s life, the address and the room in which her love was most real, the locales in which I knew I loved her—the scene that fixes in my mind comes from the kitchen in our old house in South Saint Paul. I see my mother pulling a box of Quaker Oats down from the cupboard. I see her walking to the foot of the stairs and calling up, Kids! Come eat! (She never really raised her voice when she wanted to be heard, but rather had the annoying habit of merely making her voice sound as if she were speaking from far away, like a clumsy ventriloquist). I see my mother tossing a dish towel down the clothes chute, recall that she once walked by and absentmindedly tossed a loaf of bread down the chute in the same way. I see her spreading peanut butter, cutting the sandwiches lengthwise instead of diagonally as we insisted.

In 1965 we sold the house, and the new owners did nothing to repair or improve it for the next thirty-
five years. Finally the housing inspectors condemned the building, but before it was torn down my sister found the bureaucrat who held the key. He kindly let us walk through the empty rooms, a week before the bulldozer came. It's so small, my mother kept marveling. How did six of us ever eat at a table in here? We were smaller, too, of course; progressively rising pencil marks that recorded our heights could still be seen, near the basement door. But my mother's amazement was understandable: It was a tiny kitchen. Bathrooms in most suburban homes today are larger than this kitchen.

For all the knowledge that my childhood lay under the grime and dust of this house, it was not an especially haunted trip back. I revere E.B. White's essay "Once More to the Lake," in which he talks about having the odd feeling that he is his father and his son is him, and that the roads, the weeds, the jokes the swimmers tell, have all happened before and will keep happening again in a Mobius strip.
forgotten the rest of her book: We choose our pasts.

I spent a lot of my young life trying to choose a suitable past. I had the bad luck, in late adolescence, to have fallen in with a crowd of friends and a small group of young teachers who collected angst, for whom a knowledge of their parents’ shortcomings was an indispensable credential of self-awareness. They didn’t know they were clueless, of course. They were good kids; many of them were geniuses. There are worse things to aspire to than a bruised psyche you can wear like a shiner, and however earnest our late adolescent pain may have been, almost none of them ended up unhappy. My friends and I invented explanations for our parents’ imperfections as shepherds lying on their backs and watching the night sky might make up legends about the constellations.

The starting point and the end point of all these stories was our own escape. We were not going to become them. Our greater sensitivity and maturity beyond our years assured us that we were going to be—already were!—open and secure, free from artifice. The past is the freest possible place, the only opportunity we have to live unencumbered by the tyranny of expedience and fact. Like the Q-bomb in Dr. Strangelove, the past cannot be disabled and no power on earth can do anything about it. We can only revise it through our imagination, and when we are young and have the blithe ability to set loose tidal waves of hubris, the imagination can run unchecked.

When I was twenty, I went away to a yearlong vocational program in practical nursing. It was a stupid decision: I had never worked in health care before, and it took me a dozen years to realize that I had never wanted to. My mother didn’t think it was a good idea for me to go to nursing school, but then, my mother was opposed to almost everything, and I discounted her opinion. My father didn’t have much to say about it, so I took off for the vocational school in Faribault, Minnesota, where I also happened to know the parents of my boyhood best friend. They rented a room to me for the absurd sum of five dollars a week. I was aware that this was largesse on their part, and for the whole year I realized that I was a guest and not a renter, and thus did little to personalize my old friend’s room in which I was encamped, besides putting up a couple of Sierra Club posters.

A ragged hole gaped on the outside of my bedroom door, which I later learned was the result of my friend’s brother having punched it in rage. Over that hole, I taped two pictures cut from National Wildlife magazine. One was of a koala bear, clinging to the green sprout of a eucalyptus, its toy-like face the essence of naivété and vulnerability, the face that makes you want to hug it as a child clutches a stuffed animal. The other picture was of a giant iguana with its head raised haughtily against the Galapagos sky. They covered the hole in the door, and when my friends and landlords asked me why I had chosen those two pictures I joked that they were “family portraits—that’s my mom and dad.”

The funny thing is, my joke was an accurate statement of what I believed, of how I had rewritten my past. At that point, I thought my mother was the iguana: unapproachable, without deep feelings, skittishly fleeing whenever the outside world intruded. And I thought of my father as the koala bear, the most lovable man in the world; which in a lot of ways, he was. What I overlooked in that account was that my father had also fallen into a habit of absence from my life, and that when—as any child will do—I had thrown up one or another of those baffling roadblocks to his affection that only children can perfect, he had simply given up.

Twenty years later I would find myself weeping as I wrote a memoir of him, tears streaming down my cheeks as my writing led me to admit my own father-hunger at last; there was an image of my father on that door, but I didn’t know it was the crater in the veneer behind the picture.

And my mother?

Maybe she wasn’t as warm a person as I might have liked. Maybe she was a little too quick to disapprove any change from the familiar, and a lot too quick to discourage any risk-taking or competition by her children. As a small-town Irish Catholic girl who’d never been offered educational horizons beyond learning to type and take shorthand, she may have been a little overmatched by her cerebral sons, and it’s clear she really didn’t have the first clue about how to approach college and
career choices. What I didn't realize then was that, however inadequate and off-target she may have been about some things, my mother was always doing her best.

Nobody needs to tell me, now, how hard it is to be a good and available parent. It took me a long time to realize that I couldn't say that about my father; it's taken me even longer to realize I absolutely can say it of my mother. She did the best she could.

Roethke concludes one of his poems with a little couplet that runs, "dissection is a virtue when / It operates on other men." As I near fifty, I am coming to realize that he was right. At the very least, "the examined life"—if it really is a virtue—ought to come later. When I recall the presumption of youth, in which a supposed self-awareness became its own raison d'être, I do wish I'd directed the energy I put into self-examination more toward the big world out there: That I'd chased more girls, learned how to dive, played a lot of volleyball. I wish I had embraced times and places as well as I embraced pop psychology, faux philosophy. No one told me, or my precious, psychologically-minded friends—or if they did tell us, we would have been too superior to hear them—that we were too young to sum up anything. At one point in my life, I thought my mother was the iguana, harsh, aloof, lacking emotion. I pray for her now; and I pray, too, that I might be forgiven, for having been so wrong.

* 

We are lost to geography up here, but not to time: a stewardess announces that we're about twenty minutes from touchdown.

Eavan Boland keeps reappearing in my thoughts. Her great project, as a poet and an essayist, is to write the silence of women back into literature, and she titled an important collection Outside History. She insists that we make a distinction between history and the past, and that history—the stories that get told—is something different from what really happened. I want to make a comparable distinction in my own life. I want to cling to those moments not freighted with category and naming and interpretation. I want to hold my mother outside metaphor.

Can we know we are loved when we are not fully embodied, fully in a place? I'm not sure. What I do know is, that whatever else love is, it's not an abstraction: love is my mother making sandwiches, my mother lying on a hospital gurney, getting her head stitched up on an Easter Sunday afternoon.

These layers of clouds below me: if, as I've been thinking, there is nowhere quite so removed from place and particularity as an airplane, then cloudy days make it doubly so. I am pretty sure that by now we have crossed one or another of the Great Lakes stretched out in a blue mantle over the curve of the earth, but I never saw it. I'm guessing, based on the time elapsed, that below these clouds lie the rich farmlands of the Midwest, that here and there along the rivers and the railroad lines there are towns, and houses with backyards and kitchens; and that in many of those houses right now, there are children and mothers who love each other so much that description fails. Here, on this
plane headed west from New York, I pray that joy will continue to be a part of my mother's life, enough to bring her in the end to what we can call a happy death—though I know that her body is failing, that delight has been leeching away from my mother, the thousand small losses of age wearing her away, pinprick by pinhole by slap in the face.

We live in bodies that inevitably fail; we live with bodies that inevitably fail. I said that air travel suggests the historic locales of prayer, and it does. But it also hints at a kind of hell or purgatory, in the sense that those are places defined in part by the excruciating awareness that they stand apart from another world. This is a flight headed home and, as such, I suppose the governing metaphor of this journey should be that of reentry, of stepping back into the life that waits at home. And of course that's true. But it's also true that on this flight headed back from New York I grasp, in a way that I never did before, that although every thread of the past, every scene that I recall, could be traced instant after instant back from this moment, the past remains utterly irretrievable. Someday soon, my mother will no longer be in the world. The ways in which I remember her, the places that I link with her so vividly in memory will eventually—like all human memories—become a sort of unconsulted archive.

How odd that this is best realized in a moment among strangers, in a muffled no-place, miles above the earth.
Copyright of Ruminate Magazine is the property of Ruminate Magazine and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.