
STRANGERS ON A PLANE

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*Sed fugit interea fugit irreparabile tempus, singula
dum capti circumvectamur amore.*

—Virgil

But Time flies mean-while, flies irretrievable,
while we, enamoured of the pleasing Theme,
minutely trace Particulars.

—Joseph Davidson translation [emphasis his],
1803

Sed fugit (But flee)

A June day in 2005, and it's my first trip back to California¹ in eleven years (where I lived in the early 1980s when I was in my twenties). I am traveling west for my stepbrother Gil's memorial service. Diagnosed with cancer of unknown origin in February, he died on Memorial Day weekend, succumbing to a massive coronary, which was likely caused by the radiation meant to stall the progress of disease. When we last saw each other in December, Gil was complaining of some mild discomfort in his groin. By February, he had a rapidly progressing, unidentifiable cancer. By the end of spring, he was gone. The compression of time has disoriented me more than I care to admit; I'm having trouble believing that a man I saw relatively recently—a man who knew me as a child, watched me grow up, and became my friend once I became an adult—is no longer alive. A little less than two months earlier, Gil and I were talking about the possibility of my traveling out West to visit. And now I am on my way, but clearly not as we had planned. This blurring of time—as if all our conversations had occurred in one moment now vanished, not over the course of years that slowly passed—makes me a little dizzy.

¹ Because much can be said about coming of age on the West Coast at the start of the Reaganomics Era, I offer here this timeline »

In early fall, I move to Santa Cruz, California, where I attend Cabrillo College for one semester and then UC Santa Cruz for eight consecutive quarters as a theater major with a film emphasis. Reagan is elected in November. When he is shot, I tell anyone who will listen that it would be scarier if he dies and the former head of the CIA—George Bush #1—takes over, one of those prescient ironies of the Republican 1980s. During this same period, I experience an earthquake for the first time and, in a seemingly simultaneous moment, publish my first piece of periodical writing (about the fate of women artists). I proclaim myself a lesbian—to my friends, co-workers, professors, and most of my immediate family (notably, I decline to share this information with my father and my stepmother, Phoebe, Gil's mother and, coincidentally, the woman who raised me once my father won custody of me). John Lennon is shot and killed in December, and I start to wonder what I am really getting into by becoming an adult.

1980

Ron, the elder of my two older half brothers—who will die from AIDS-related illness in October 1990—has a son. Ken, the younger of my two half brothers—who will die in June 2011—starts to lose his footing as an adult. His girlfriend, after years of losing money and self-esteem to Ken's drug habit and inability to work, leaves him, and he is evicted from his home, which he has trashed.

1981

By the time I leave Northern California for Los Angeles, I have acquired three cats, discovered Virginia Woolf, am obsessively enamored with New Wave filmmakers such as Jean-Luc Godard and Alain Resnais. I proclaim that sexuality is irrelevant and begin living with a wonderful man for whom I am not ready, and have transferred to UCLA, where I intend to study filmmaking. When I realize I don't want to go into debt to make a student film, I become an English major, and after one semester, too much Samuel Beckett, and too many arguments about Chaucer and the Wife of Bath, I decide that UCLA is not my cup of educational tea. I stop going to school and take a full-time job as assistant to a historian working on a two-volume, annotated bibliography on Victorian women in England. This adventure ends with all three cats dying of feline leukemia, which is a relatively new disease at the time and will come to be called Kitty AIDS but which will not be at all like AIDS.

1982

After Phoebe dies—as a result of an infection during a fairly routine pacemaker replacement operation—I leave the relationship with the wonderful man for whom I am not ready. My brother Ron is at the summit of his addictions, Ken is living in his car with three dogs, and Gil seems as lost as he'll ever be. My father's fridge is stocked with orange juice and cigars. My mother retreats to the back bedroom of her apartment. I start to lose hope in my family.

1983

In 1984, I move to the mountains of eastern France, where I study applied linguistics and French literature. My three big brothers are not only not watching me, they are drifting further into drug addiction and trouble. California becomes my past. Which is one reason that going back there for a memorial seems so bizarre. After all, the last time Gil and I were standing together on the West Coast, we were both still smoking pot and taking LSD but functioning to the best of our abilities. After a time, we both give up a lot of bad habits and vices. He marries and has a daughter. We materialize into the adults our parents hoped we would become, even if who we really are doesn't match the exact expectations they envisioned for us.

1984

Interea (meanwhile)

I am flying out of Baltimore. At the airport’s food court, I observe three women working at the sandwich shop where I’ve purchased a bagel. I am looking for evidence that people—in this case, strangers—might turn out to be different than expected, or, maybe, that coincidence replicates itself randomly. Instead, I’m watching some impromptu theater, proving that either I’m not sure what I want, or that my expectations are often misguided. The one who has taken my order appears sheepish, sleep deprived, and underpaid. She moves as slowly as she pleases—the phrases “slow as molasses,” “slow as a snail,” and “slow as a turtle” are not only all too cliché, they are inaccurate—her movement is beyond perception. A second woman works the register. She counts out my change—eighty-eight cents—with the same movement-as-imperceptible slowness. Degenerative movement. Nonmovement that stirs only the slightest. *They’re in a time warp*, I think.

“Thank you,” I say. She stares at the register as if we did not just have an exchange. Unregistering.

I sit at a nearby table and watch them as they talk. The third woman sits on a stool as if it were a throne.

“What *you* need is a better attitude,” she says, addressing the order-taking woman. “None of this ‘bagel’s burned’ shit. You *need* to be more friendly.”

“I’m friendly,” the woman replies. Not one note of emphasis, let alone argument, rises in her voice. Her self-assessment is barely pronounced, echoing the slow-motion way she walks and reaches, slices and toasts, butters and wraps.

“Don’t *give* me that,” the seated woman says. She iterates her gripes with the order taker: she needs to take orders accurately, grin and bear it, smile even, no excuses, and, *please*, speed up the motion.

A pause ensues. The butter on my bagel has melted and will drip when I bite into it, pooling onto the waxed paper. I’ll swirl it with my forefinger and lick it off, a habit that may not be especially appetizing, but then who is watching me eat? The three women are silent and still. I might as well be invisible to them. No one is waiting to order. The tables here, save mine, are empty.

“I don’t know about Charlene,” the seated woman says finally. “I don’t listen to her no more.”

The absent Charlene likely worked here once or still does, though she might easily be the speaker’s sister or cousin or friend. Possibly, she was the women’s supervisor. Or maybe she is another employee, like the order taker and the cashier, whose work habits are not up to snuff. Or perhaps Charlene frequently calls in sick and the woman on the stool isn’t buying any more excuses.²

Time has stopped here, I muse as all three women fall silent, each of them staring at a different vanishing point. Time, I remind myself, is a conceit, and nothing has really *stopped* because nothing has really *started*. What Stephen Hawking calls the “thermodynamic arrow of time, the direction of time in which disorder or entropy increases,” is present here, as is the “psychological arrow of time,” in which the past, not the future, can be recalled. But these thoughts seem a little too academic for the occasion. And besides, what’s really happening is that Gil’s life—*his* time—has ended.³ Abruptly.

None of this occurs to me until I am chewing on the last bite of bagel. The arrow of time might explain that what I am experiencing is a cosmological event, one in which, Hawking observes, “the universe is expanding rather than contracting.” It’s unnerving to consider that loss has expanded my universe. *But what does it matter?* I think. Quantum mechanics and the laws of thermodynamics and chaos theory and all the stimulating complexities of mind that might be used to contemplate

2 In this detail from Ambrogio Lorenzetti’s Allegory of Good Government (below), 1338, Temperance (Moderation) holds an hour glass (Time), suggesting: 1. Good things come to those who wait and/or 2. If you don’t overdo it, time will be kind to you and/or 3. Time can be on your side.

3 Because Phoebe’s death in 1983 precipitated my departure from California, the death of her son precipitating my return colors this trip in a way that makes the moments of arrival and departure seem odder than they really are. And then there are the other coincidences related to the timing of events and the ages and relationships of the players, illustrated in the schematic below:

	March 1989	October 1990	August 2004	May 2005
 <p>Detail from Ambrogio Lorenzetti’s Allegory of Good Government</p>	My mother, who was my half brother Ron’s stepmother, commits suicide.	Ron dies from AIDS-related complications	My father, who was my stepbrother Gil’s stepfather, dies of end-stage renal disease.	Gil dies of cancer. He is, coincidentally, the same age as his mother when she died. And, Gil’s daughter is the same age as Gil was—thirteen—when his father died.

or comprehend what is lost when those we love die seem moot. On the surface, loss has numbed me to the bone; in the universe of my interior, however, a kind of doomed entropy manifests, which makes me afraid to cry lest the crying never cease. While I may not appear nervous to people who are unfamiliar with my endless scrutiny of problems; or my exacting, weeks-sometimes-months-ahead planfulness for any event long or short; or the ability to see at once the dust mote in the corner, the disarray of pillows on the bed, *and* the sunbeam on the carpet, I have come to accept that I am an anxious person. Who wants to admit they are not calm, or that panic loiters in encounters with disorder (a thing to undo at all costs and junctures), or that you might be nervous about intimacy because it seems as if everyone you've ever loved or wanted to love has died? The root of the word *anxious*, an adjective that did not come into usage until the seventeenth century, means to cause pain, to strangle or distress. I may not wear anguish on my sleeve, but I'm pretty sure it wears me out at times.

fugit irreparabile tempus (flees irretrievable time)

At the gate, I request preboarding status. "Brother's memorial," I explain. "I'll have to get off the plane quickly." Of course, the truth is a little more convoluted, and the request for special dispensation while traveling is one of those family practices one might call my legacy.⁴ My mother was flamboyant, reserving wheelchair assistance whenever she traveled on airplanes, which was infrequent, but she made such a fuss about her "condition" that an image of her has likely burned itself into the memory of anyone who ever worked the few times she flew what were still fairly friendly skies (I cannot picture her putting up with contemporary security checks). As the clerk at Southwest Air hands me the blue, plastic preboarding ticket jacket, I wonder how many flight attendants and airport workers might actually remember my mother, a bottle blonde with almost-black eyes, pale skin, nails polished an umbered peach. She likely wore a wide-brimmed hat, a fancy blouse, matching pocketbook and shoes, a hint of Chanel No. 5 at her wrists. My father was more controlled (and he usually traveled in understated attire: a gray suit, jeans even, a collared shirt always): the minute something went awry, he convinced those in charge to award a commensurate recompense, from a complimentary drink to a first-class upgrade. My brother Ken liked to talk his way onto planes without a standard form of identification (he often bragged about using a debit card and a medical-marijuana ID), even post 9/11. Me, I prefer to be among the first five passengers to board and disembark, but I use this coupon only when it really matters, and today it does. Saving time—that thing that never begins or stops, which humanity has measured with a stunning array of mechanical devices,

⁴ *Legacy* is a word one should, perhaps, reserve for genetic makeup or inherited money, land, jewelry, or other artifacts of either monetary or sentimental value, but in my family, what has been passed from one generation to the next is more nebulous and directly related to an affinity for captivating one's audience in order to extract oneself from trouble or, alternately, promote oneself into an upgrade, proving one of Lenny Bruce's theories, namely that "the Jew got out of Egypt by being charming."

from sundials and hourglasses to watches and atomic clocks⁵—is my singular purpose. Soon I've taken my place in the third row, aisle seat.

The plane takes off, rises above the buildings and roads, highways and subdivisions and strip malls—an American landscape constructed over the course of my lifetime, but which had just germinated when Gil was a child—and into the clouds. Because Gil was fifteen years my senior and because he grew up in a different household, what I know of his childhood is sketchy. Dogs were part of his family, and he made a picture of them when he was little, which I discovered after both my father and Gil had died. The drawing, of two beagles, was made with crayon on brown craft paper; it is the only proof, aside from photos, that Gil *was* a child. If there were no such evidence, and all the people who might testify to my brother's existence as a boy are now dead (and thus their memories vanished, too), does it mean that he may never have been a child? Or am I stretching too wide the if-a-tree-falls-in-the-woods-and-you-don't-hear-it conundrum? Certainly for myself, as I grow older, childhood in its increasing distance seems more and more of a mythology than a chronology, but then again, the word *chronology* summons the myth of Cronus, the Titan who is best known for swallowing his own kids.

What I know about Gil comes from the pivotal events marking the timeline of his adult life. He had gone to Harvard and dropped out, lured by my brother Ron into the 1960s drug culture. For a time, he worked as a taxi driver in New York City; those years were dark—a too-close encounter with a knife at his throat; a one-room apartment that almost burned because he had fallen asleep with a lit cigarette. His mother, Phoebe, wondered what she had done wrong, knowing there was nothing she could do to right the situation. Then Gil moved to northern California and became a mechanic. He quit hard drugs, with an occasional weekend devoted to hallucinogens, but remained a dedicated pot smoker. Cigarettes were next to go. But it wasn't until after Phoebe passed away that he gave up the drugs, and after more than twenty years of living alone, he met the woman who became his wife and the mother of his daughter.

Singula dum capti (separate until caught)

Across the aisle and one row in front of me, a white-haired man wearing rimless glasses reads a book titled *The Nomadic Church*. He's stretched one blue-jeaned leg beyond the seat, retracting it when anyone passes. Dave, the short, chubby man sitting next to me, is working. His clothes are rumpled, his comb-over disheveled. He's short but barely fits into the seat. He resembles an unappealingly sweaty and hungover Wallace Shawn, which might have endeared him to me at first but is now nullified because his papers migrate past the borders of his tray table into my space. He's also hogging our shared armrest, and he's left the cap off the pen I lent him earlier, which annoys me. But before these small acts of

⁵ Imagine the original impulse to "capture" time that must have preoccupied the first clockmakers. Not to mention the engineering expertise such an enterprise certainly requires. Is the urge to count and organize units of time unique to humans? Clearly, other animals have internal "clocks" that trigger their impulses to mate, relocate, and hunt, but none except humans have invented the elaborate methods of capturing something that is both impossible to catch and unworthy of being caught (for apprehension of time would surely mean its cessation). Although it is tempting to imagine a leopard retrieving a timepiece from some heretofore-unknown pocket, examining it, and deciding to rush off in pursuit of an antelope, in reality our human compunction to need to know what time it is and act accordingly is suspect.

trespass and carelessness, we had a conversation about the environmental causes of cancer, including nuclear-missile testing and the subsequent radiation that drifted East when, as he put it, “our generation was young.” The company he works for provides medical insurance for people with preexisting conditions.⁶ I tell him I’ve read quite a bit about Chernobyl and that Three Mile Island was a pivotal moment in my coming of age. I don’t say that Gil, whose mother died of breast cancer, was one of those kids who ran behind the DDT trucks that sprayed the suburbs where he lived as a child. Dave tells me he had thyroid cancer.

“That’s why I’m fat,” he says. He wipes his forehead with a graying handkerchief. I’ve been uncharitable, I realize, categorizing my seatmate as a guy who has “let himself go.” And anyway, I wonder simultaneously, how *does* one unhand one’s self?

“If you’re going to get cancer,” Dave says, “it’s the best one to have.” He leans toward me, his breath exuding the odor of mint and pretzels. “I’m 99 percent cured,” he confides. I don’t mention my former coworker Julie, who, just months before she died, liked to tell everyone she was “fucked by 10 percent,” referring to cervical cancer’s 90 percent recovery rate, which is one of those facts you see in all the literature. I don’t talk about her, but I think about all the timepieces we put in her office—on the walls and desk, around her wrist, even the computer clock—and how none of them ever kept accurate time, leading us to suspect that the room existed in some pocket of the universe that was contracting.

“Where are you headed?” he asks. Standard seatmate question, only I sense my answer will make me feel discomfort for what Dave must always be thinking about, even when he doesn’t want to, that 1 percent.

“My brother died . . . of cancer. I’m going to his memorial service,” I say. “Cancer of unknown origin,” I add, in an effort to be mindful of his unspoken fears.

“I’m sorry.” He fidgets in his seat. The woman next to him turns her back to us and rests her head between the seat and the window. Dave tells me he has no thyroid. He loves his miniature schnauzer and hates traveling without the dog. “I don’t know what I’d do without him,” he says.

I nod. Smile. In a minute or two, I’ll shut my eyes and float in that half sleep induced by transport, all the way to the West Coast.

“We really don’t know what’s going on,” Dave says. “The sun has

6 Here is one of those strange temporal gaps that often happen to people who record events of a particular time: in 2005, it was still possible for health-insurance companies to deny coverage to people with certain pre-existing conditions. Now (2012) under Obamacare, it’s illegal to refuse insurance because of pre-existing conditions, which makes me wonder what transitions Dave had to undergo in terms of employment when the law changed. As I was first writing this footnote, the Supreme Court was wrestling with the constitutionality of Obamacare, and though they did not undo it, if they had, we would have returned to 2005. Proving that we are driven in some inane way to constantly return to the past. Or, alternately, proving that time may not really move.

gotten hotter. Just yesterday it burned the back of my neck. And I was only walking the dog.”

I recline. Through the space between Dave’s seat and mine, I glimpse the family sitting behind us. Two parents and their two young boys—one on his mother’s lap—share three seats. She is asleep. The father holds a book about Madagascar.

I close my eyes and listen to the man as he reads to his kids. “It’s not sanitary,” he says. “*Sanitary* . . . it’s not clean,” he explains when one of the sons asks what the word means. In the next sentence, the word *unanimous*. “What does that mean?” he asks his sons. They don’t know. “You know, when we all agree, it means we’re unanimous.” The younger boy laughs.

This father reminds me of Gil, specifically, how patient he seems, which is how my brother had been with his only child and daughter, Keiko, who is now thirteen, the same age as Gil when his father died. Gentleness in a razor-edged world where a sister preboards an open-seating flight because she has to exit quickly once the plane lands. *Brother’s memorial service*. Maybe if I say these words enough, the idea that Gil is no longer alive will become real.

I’ve drifted into that liminal zone between sleep and waking, a place without time, where premature deaths, suffering, and rapid exits do not intrude. It’s the part of flying, and traveling on trains and buses, that I most love, perhaps because the passage of time is suspended, but also because some part of consciousness directs the dreaming, as opposed to the unconscious, where demons and fear not only reside, they often assume starring roles.

In my half-asleep reverie, this trip takes shape as the one Gil and I frequently talked about during the eleven years I lived in Maine (a trip that never materialized because I was tethered by insufficient funds, lack of vacation time, procrastination brought on by no sense of urgency, or any combination thereof): Gil meets me at the airport. His wife, Nora, has prepared dinner, which we will eat together at their table in their house. When I disembark, he and Keiko are waiting at the gate. We embrace. I say I can’t believe how grown up Keiko is, inflecting in a way that can only be described as New York Jewish.⁷ She smiles, averts her eyes. Gil lightly touches his daughter’s shoulder. His steel-gray eyes remind me of his mother, whom he resembles. Gil smiles, and Phoebe will be in the room for an instant, past and present will collapse, and then we all three will ride in his car from Oakland to San Ramon. We stop at the store to buy coffee. We share family news—that our cousin Arlene has recovered from a recent surgery, or that another cousin is, unfortunately, out of town; that Gil’s in-laws from Hawaii are here and eager to meet me. We update each other—he’s just published an editorial in a local newspaper protesting an ordinance that will encourage development; I’ve been seeing a man I know he’d like—and we learn, as siblings separated by large geographies, a little more about each other’s lives.

7 When hearing in my proclamations the voices of my parents (people I swore as a teenager I would never emulate), voices that, when I catch a snippet of their echoes in the voices of friends, I feel the collapse of the temporal dimension that separates the living from the dead in less time than it takes to think about what’s happening. Such excursions into parallel universes furnish proof that time might be the biggest human hoax ever invented.

“Wake up, wake up.” Dave is jostling my arm. “Wake up,” he repeats. “Medical emergency.” My mind turtles out of its pleasant haze and back into the real present, where Gil can no longer drive or hug or stop at a store or tell me one good or bad thing about his day or week or life.

“Carol,” says the blonde flight attendant, whose name, I’ll soon learn, is Carrie. “Carol,” she says a second time, her voice sharp, edged with just enough question and pitch to suggest she’s on the brink of panic. Carrie has squeezed herself into the space between rows two and three on the opposite side of the aisle; on her knees, she holds Carol’s hand, repeats her name. Carol is unconscious and stretched out across the three seats; her husband, the tall man in jeans who had been reading, is now standing in the aisle, his jacket brushing against my shoulder.

“Is there a medic, EMT, or doctor on board?” asks Russell, the male flight attendant, over the intercom. It’s our lucky day, or, more precisely, Carol’s: the woman sitting behind her is an EMT. But she steps back upon learning that there’s a group of thirty or so physicians in the back of the plane, en route to a diabetes conference in San Diego. A cardiologist and an internist come forward.

Carol, I learn from her retired Methodist pastor husband, has diverticulitis and Crohn’s disease. I ask if he’d like to sit down, but he declines and rests his hand on my seat back. We start up a conversation, which will, I hope, distract him. The space on the plane is constructed for only one crisis at a time before pandemonium results. I’m relieved by his calm as he tells me that his wife has twice fallen unconscious while traveling on planes, the first time when they were returning from Israel. “She passed over . . . I mean she *passed out*,” he says, “over the Atlantic. *That* was a long flight.”

And what a great Freudian slip, I think. How many Methodists, I wonder, pass over from Israel?

The doctors take Carol’s blood pressure. Monitor her pulse, timepiece of the heart. Carrie the flight attendant calls Medic Alert; she looks as if she’s heard unbearably bad news. My seatmate tells me that when a flight is bumpy, which this one is right now, he becomes nervous. He sometimes grips the armrests, he explains, his knuckles whitening as he speaks.

“Can I buy you a drink?” he asks, as if we’re sitting at a bar.

“No thanks,” I say, hoping that my steadied, serious gaze is communicating how inappropriate I find his offer.

“I only drink to calm my nerves.”

Dave, I think, *you don’t have to justify having a drink. You’re an adult*. But just before I suggest that he might want to wait until the chaos subsides before ordering that drink, he presses the flight-attendant call button. Carrie shakes her head emphatically and gives him a daggered look. She’s probably wondering, as I am, how this guy could have such nerve. Only the word circulating in my head is *chutzpah*, while in hers it’s likely *balls*.

Carol’s blood pressure is too low. The doctors discuss a potential plan. It’s possible the plane will have to land soon, which frightens Dave.

“We’re going through lightning storms now,” he says, gripping both armrests. The woman in the window seat, who has awakened and is paying attention to the medical emergency, discreetly rolls her eyes at Dave’s statement. I smile at her. We are strangers on a plane, but we have become instant allies. She doesn’t know that, selfishly, I want to make my connecting flight with no hassles. I want to arrive at Gil’s memorial with

a minimum of eventfulness and a maximum of rest. I need time to write what I’ll say at the service. Time to visit with my cousin, who’s picking me up, and his kids, whom I’ll be meeting for the first time. Time to see my sister-in-law and my niece. Time to absorb what little I’ll see of Berkeley and Oakland. *After all this time away from California*, I think, *and I’m here for a funeral*.

Because of Dave’s panicky agitation, I rise from my seat, and for the next twenty minutes, I stand. We all seem to be waiting for Carol’s blood pressure to return to normal. The little boy who repeated *blast off* before the plane was airborne is now awake. He’s asking a lot of questions, troubled certainly by the thick sense of impending trouble that all the adults on the plane are pondering, each of us projecting various scenarios, with Carol’s death the most prominent and frightening. Blast-off boy’s dad holds his son close to his chest.

I’m standing next to Russell in the forward galley, something you can’t do these days because of heightened security measures, when Carol revives. Carrie lets out the breath she was holding. Dave, who has been leaning forward, settles back into his seat and squeezes his eyes closed. Russell tells me that three weeks ago, he and Carrie watched a woman die on board a flight to Chicago. “It was a bloody mess,” he tells me. Carrie, he says in an almost-whisper, is still in shock.

“It’s getting harder to fly,” he says. “The stress is greater. More stuff happens. People who travel are older, with more health problems.” His eyes are trained on an elderly woman in one of the bulkhead seats. “That one there, she’s about ready to have an anxiety attack,” he says in a low voice, adding, “we spotted your seatmate from the beginning. You learn after many years to see the troublemakers.” The kid who’ll have a bloody nose. The guy on meth who freaks out. The nervous traveler who asks for a drink in the middle of a medical emergency. “I can see this one,” he says, pointing with his chin at the older woman in the first row, “working herself into a heart attack.”

Circumvectamur amore (to travel round love)

I return to my seat. We are flying over mountains. I close my eyes. When I open them, New Mexico is below us. It’s almost noon, Pacific Standard Time. If Gil hadn’t had cancer and then that heart attack, if he hadn’t died, he’d be having lunch right now. A sandwich, maybe, or tacos. Or he’d be readying to have lunch, washing his mechanic’s hands, stepping out of his coveralls, running a comb through his hair. Instead, what remains of him is now in an urn, which will be carried into the memorial service at the Berkeley Zen Center, prayed over, and returned home to a shelf in the bedroom where Gil slept and dreamed, held and loved his wife. His widow and daughter will look at the container and each retreat into the private, singular ache caused by his death. There is no way around any of this. Time stands in the way. It moves ahead even if we desire only to go back. To say what we might have not said. Or do something differently. Love harder, deeper, more righteously.

The elderly woman in the bulkhead seat is traveling with a reddish-haired companion who wears sandals that light up when she walks and a T-shirt with rhinestone letters that spell out *Registered Diva*. The two women speak in German. The older one wants out of her seat and makes repeated attempts to stand. She doesn't seem to realize that she's restrained by a seat belt; it's possible she's not aware of being on a plane. She finally convinces her caretaker to let her up. She stands and makes ready to move toward the back of the aircraft. At the sight of the children—blast-off boy and a girl two rows back and the two brothers behind me, all of whom are standing on the seats or chattering—the woman's face brightens. Her wrinkles tighten as a smile stretches across her entire face. As if she's never seen kids. Appeased, she sits down.

"I've found my armadillo," says the three-year-old behind me. "That's great, sweetheart," his father says.

Carrie strokes Carol's hair—Carol, whose blood pressure has stabilized and who has no clue what happened. Carol, for whom a period of time has elapsed without record in her memory. Russell talks with Carol's husband, who will soon sit down. But right now, he's standing, and Russell has his hand on the pastor's back. *Flight attendants who touch*.

Dave has closed his eyes. The woman next to him leans toward me. "That was scary," she says.

"Indeed," I reply.

We speak in a hushed way, both of us partially hovering over Dave, intruding into his space as he shifts his weight and snores. The woman arches her eyebrows. "We'll talk more once we've landed," I suggest.⁸ We sit back in our seats.

I close my eyes. Carol is talking. "Honey," she asks her husband, her voice faint and slightly atremble, "do you have my lipstick?"

The question seems so intimate. What Carol wants, I suppose, is to forget all that has happened. *Such an embarrassment*, she probably thinks. To pass out on an airplane and be the center of attention among so many strangers. People for whom arriving on time at a destination is important. People for whom wasting time is paramount to a small suicide. *But*, I wonder, *how can you waste time?* I picture hourglasses emptied of their sand and clocks gutted of their mechanisms, but no image captures the idea of regret implied in "wasting time," an expression that summons for me not only something thrown away but also the inexplicableness of squander.

The flight attendants ask us to prepare for landing; without much fanfare we have become passengers again, traveling from one point to another, obediently responding to requests to stow bags and ensuring that our seatbelts are securely fastened. The children behind me settle down, and throughout the plane, travelers latch tray tables and return their seats to the upright position. Carrie and Russell have made it through another strange day at work. Dave is in remission; our seatmate presses her forehead against the window and watches the landscape of southern California come into view. Carol and her husband have passed over yet another episode of potential loss. "Time flies when you have none," I scribble on a scrap of paper, which will remain at the bottom of my bag, to be found like a message unearthed in a time capsule, years later.

I like to think that as his life ended, my brother Gil didn't think about saving, wasting, or killing time. That his last hours were, simply, a time to live and a time to die, Ecclesiastes fulfilling an essentially Taoist notion on the personal scale. And who knows, perhaps the cosmological arrow of time curved or bent, twisting around some bump in the cosmos, and the universe as he knew it expanded into a future only he would remember. ❧

⁸ We do talk later. The woman, who is from Thailand, is named Noodi. She tells me the story of her family. Her grandmother was a mistress of the King of Siam. She was also a milliner, who once invented a hat by pounding a gourd. The queen ordered some straw hats from the West, but found them ugly. When the milliner decorated them, the hats became beautiful. Because the king had gone to England and become westernized, Noodi explains, he took only one wife. And because Noodi's grandmother had also remade the queen's hats, she was released from the palace and given three trunks of jewelry. She married an officer, considered a commoner, and lost her royal title. "Here," Noodi says, "royalty means nothing. Then again, the anonymity is kind of good, too." Turns out the officer was not a gentleman, but "a no-good guy, with a woman in every port, leaving grandma with a baby each time he came home." The milliner lived off the jewelry. How remarkable, I think, that I am talking with the granddaughter of the queen's hat maker, who will call me a year later and tell me she wants to write her family's story, but doesn't feel capable. Thus the narrative remains sealed in something that might be described as the opposite of time, waiting for the clock to start.