

Nicholas Pierce

In-Flight Entertainment

The screens fold down only after we've
begun to descend, blinking to life
with footage — live footage, it would seem —
of a plane's undercarriage — our plane's,

it would seem. Glancing at the window
to my left confirms this impression,
the mountains in one duplicated
in the other, a runway in both

taking shape. The landing gear folds down
next, which I can hear as usual
and for the first time see — in real time,
no less, though on a four-inch TV.

It occurs to me then how surreal
it would be were something to go wrong —
if, say, as in countless films, a flock
of migrating seagulls were vacuumed

into one of our jet engines, flames,
feathers, and viscera spewing out
the other end, all of it captured
on camera and played back for us

in what would almost certainly be
the most exciting, not to say fun,
documentary we'd ever watch,
we who would be dead in a matter

of seconds, who till the very end
would continue praying that the plane
would right itself, for some *deus ex*
machina, some Hollywood ending.

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Isn't this the thought everyone has
at takeoff and touchdown, that their flight
will be the next tragedy to boost
the ratings of cable news stations;

that their loved ones will watch in horror
as images of flaming debris
flash across their screens *ad nauseum*,
till they've been sapped of all power to shock

or move? (I can't be the only one
who thinks that fearing the plane will crash
will prevent it from happening, since
if it did, I'd have predicted it.)

In all likelihood, I won't be killed
in a plane crash; won't — as I've for years
suspected, as my mother did — die
of colon cancer. It's more likely

that I'll change lanes into a semi
or have an aneurism before
my seventy-first birthday party
(if that age isn't wishful thinking) —

that something I've never even thought
to fear will get me. The same is true
of everyone on board, yet we all
keep our eyes on the screens, just in case.

Then the footage suddenly freezes,
pausing on a short strip of runway —
an image blurred into abstraction
by the speed at which we're descending.

The Invisible World

1.

A young Kerouac eyes the nude
who shares his perch on the top shelf
of Joe's bookcase. Both photographs
celebrate male beauty, the self,

though one is a reproduction.
Another Beat, two shelves below,
fills the gap between Bukowski
and Carver. Oddly apropos,

a port bottle props the row up.
Religion has its own section;
poetry too. The *Other Bible*
looms over posthumous Sexton,

whose *Awful Rowing Toward God*
lists to starboard — or, rather, Starbuck.
Joe's former protégés, students
like myself ("a strapping young buck"),

compose the heart of the bookcase.
Their portraits range in size, perhaps
in accordance with importance.
Six (I keep count) minutes elapse

after Joe calls out, "Almost ready!"
We're headed to the museum
to see a new retrospective
on Magritte, who amuses him.

*

Then Joe offers his perspective:
"Notice how — it's quite discreet —
light comes from the left foreground
rather than outside. Magritte

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sought to replicate a stage.”
He traces with his pinky nail,
which extends a full inch beyond
his fingertip, a key detail —

the shadow shaped like a sickle
obscuring half the rock’s right side.
“Here we see in miniature
how the painter, petrified

though he was of such readings,
veils the very world he depicts —
yes, as with the rock. He is
both the light source and eclipse.”

2.

Unlike the eye, the mind’s eye apprehends
few differences between us: thrice my age,
Joe rarely acts it, even at this stage
of the night, when our conversation tends
to lose steam, and he — having cooked — pretends
not to mind cleaning up. Often, I’ll page
through his *New Yorkers*, see what’s all the rage
in poetry these days, or text old friends —

but not tonight. Tonight, I sit and think,
swirling my wine, watching the dregs go round,
a blizzard blotting out the lamplight drowned
in my half-empty glass, while at the sink
Joe scrubs our plates, using his pinky nail
to scratch off remnants poking out like Braille.

North of the Border

A hand pushing on my shoulder
rouses me. "Listen," Joe says,
and his tone conveys
for what, the air instantly colder
as the crackle of gunfire
starts again and then stops.
As we wait for Border Patrol or the cops
to shed light on our dire
situation, and for the hundred or so
other campers at El Cosmico

to react, we run through our choices,
running among them; though
with nowhere to go
but our car and the noises —
fainter now — coming from the direction
of the parking lot, we decide
it best to stay put, to hide
in our tent until protection
arrives, whatever and whenever
that may be, if ever.

"Could they be closer than we think,"
Joe asks, "or farther away?"
I wonder who he pictures "they"
to be, if that ink-
blot of a word conjures the same
murky images for us both,
of drug traffickers in a deal gone south
taking stock and then aim;
or if he sees, instead
(the thought passed through my head),
gunmen going tent to tent.

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I wonder, too, if this is how
it feels to be an embryo,
as I cocoon myself — ignorant
and terrified of every sound —
in my sleeping bag
and pray that the night won't drag
on much longer, until finally, around
dawn, I fall back to sleep,
only to be awakened by the beep

of Joe's phone minutes later,
reminding me that our tour
through Chinati begins in an hour.
We unzip our incubator
and scramble out, in our rush
forgetting all about the nightmare
that was our night. Like a nightmare,
it comes back in flashes, a hush
descending over the car
after I bring up the bizarre

experience, less than relieved
when Joe confirms that it occurred —
or that he at least heard
what at the time he believed
to be a shootout, stressing "at the time."
I lean my head against my window
and count the fenceposts
into town, struggling to rhyme
how we felt mere hours ago
with how we feel now.

Yesterday, we listened to a docent
go on about Judd's "mastery
over the plastic arts," leaving no mystery
unsolved in his (admittedly cogent)
interpretations. We expect
that today's tour will go similarly,
but — perhaps because it's so early —
our guide keeps his intellect
mostly to himself, instructing us
only not to touch. Thus,
as we make our way through

the first artillery shed —
a long brick building that Judd
converted into a gallery — we forget (or I do)
that we're not alone with the boxes
and speak candidly
about valuing each other's company,
which must seem obnoxious
to our observer, who must feel,
whatever our feelings, like a third wheel.

The boxes are arranged in three
evenly spaced rows. Made
from mill aluminum — the highest grade —
and polished to near-transparency,
they transform as sunlight
strikes them from different angles,
at one instant glimmering like spangles
and at another appearing white
and depthless, as a lake will
when the sun is at its zenith. The mill

aluminum is so sensitive to oils
that it can carry a fingerprint
for years, as is painfully evident
when I kneel down and see all but spoils
my reflection. Then comes a *POP!*
POP! POP!, our guide stepping in
to explain that this can happen when
the warming metal expands. We get up
from the floor, laughing off our mistake,
though the fear is harder to shake.