

A Tribute to the Flightless

December 15, 2019.

I come across a carcass in the misty Alabama woods.

It's made of metal, not flesh, but to me it hardly makes a difference.

Up the ridge and there it is, beside the trail, evidence of a spilled human dream, sprawled out vulnerably in misshapen metal pieces of blues and whites on a bed of soft browned leaves.

My gut twists and crumples like that place where the cockpit was. Trust me, I tried to rewind time, unbending metal and healing flaking paint, until it's whole again in my mind, an aircraft aloft above the trees.

But imagination is no cure for fate.

It took me longer than one might think to realize that this fractured machine was a plane. I guess I was hoping it was a car, lodged in those woods from an adventure gone only slightly too wrong. I guess I was hoping to avoid imagining what it would be like to fall from the sky, a catapulting animal reduced to the base functions of a flightless human body of flesh and blood.

The thought of a death alone in the woods, burdened by this realization of human fragility in a moment of heart-stopping fear, seemed too much to bear.

My dad cracks my dream of a car crash: *a two-seater maybe, see the way the wings crumpled?*

As if in answer, the wind whispers through dead branches, tickling my eardrums; the haunting voice of winter. The loud patter of squirrel claws on brown fallen leaves echoes sharply through the metal before me. The scratching sound reminds me of inked paper ripping slowly, disintegrating into tiny pieces under an eager hand.

I walk towards the rubble, wish the woods silent. These woods need to be silent. A quiet to match the silence of that empty metal frame.

The wings of the plane have become silent accordions, an instrument crafted by a rapid descent from the sky, folded into neat crinkles by the ancient trees. The tail is bent under, the metal frame of the seats jutting out of the rusted-out front.

I pull out my camera. I want to remember. Is it wrong to take pictures of a gravesite?

Dad starts to walk away. I want to stay. I want to collect red leaves, mossy branches; a winter bouquet. A tribute. I feel him pulling me to follow.

I leave reluctantly and let the mist mourn.

A week later that skeleton of a plane still haunts my mind. It's the black smoke that creeps in when I'm not looking. I wonder who you were, who you would have been.

I try to imagine what it must have felt like, to fall from the sky, to trust in a machine only to have it abandon you when you need it most. It seems like a common fault of man, to trust in our own genius.

I try to recreate the scene on paper, in my head, maybe to pay tribute to whoever you were, maybe to try to imagine a life cut short by the scrap of metal against the forest and the air's refusal to hold a thing aloft. Maybe trying to satiate the restlessness that comes with not knowing how to formulate an image of you in my mind, with not knowing how to pay my respects to you.

Eventually, I look up the crash online, search: *Cheaha State Park Pinhoti Trail plane crash.*

I find videos of people crunching loudly on leaves around the rubble, shoving cameras inside the remains of the plane's metal skeleton. Their voices are too loud for a place of death and destruction.

I also find:

"Kids enjoyed checking out the plane wreckage."

"...when we discovered that it was a Mooney we were excited and fascinated beyond belief."

"Be sure to check out the plane crash near the pinnacle overlook area."

Maybe I am the only one of the many before who felt that place's heavy pull of death, who felt the trees wrap them in a black velvet cloak that invited in the cold instead of keeping it out.

It looks like people have taken parts of the plane- some siding that was in the video I never saw in real life.

How morbid is it to rob a gravesite?

It turns out the trees became your gravesite in 1972. Reports say you were a 50-year-old man who took off in a Mooney M20C from the dusty, arid town of Longview, Texas with intentions to make it to Marietta, Georgia. Flight records say that somewhere in Alabama you encountered inclement weather. Maybe the clouds grew heavy and congregated against your windshield, or maybe the tears of the sky were blowing sideways out of heavy grey clouds. I guess we will never really know.

Apparently, you weren't certified to fly at night or in bad weather.

But they say you lowered the plane so you could see. They say that rocky point took you by surprise.

They say there was fire after impact.

Date of death: 12/26/1972.

They don't say whether you had radioed in. Called family. Did you even have time?

Who was expecting you in Marietta, Georgia? Where you planning to visit family? Going to a wedding, going hiking, coming back from Christmas celebrations with family? Were you just out for a joy ride?

Two days you sat in the silence of death.

Aircraft recovered: 12/28/1972.

I wonder how many other shards of broken flights are in these woods, this
world, made callous by time and the
stench
of human
curiosity
and
greed.

Some history is a bird without wings. A flightless thing that weighs heavy in dusty library books and on pages in a too glossy textbook chapter. But at least this kind of history is alive, if still wingless.

There is some history that just lays buried, dead and flightless and left to rot, like that Mooney M20C I came across on the trail. That kind of history is forced to wait until someone comes along and decides whether to honor it or take it out of greed.

That is the problem with history.

I was listening to a podcast episode recently: *The Seed Jar*. A tale of two men, a desert, and buried history.

These two men had set out alone in a red painted, dusty Utah canyon, scrambling over sandstone and slickrock, trekking towards the unknown. Mid-day, they sat down on a rock, baking gently in the sun. Their backpacks came off, and reaching down to the ground, one man finds an alcove.

A moment of confusion. Then awe. Rapt attention.

A Native American clay jar with faded, black paint and a crack through its middle. Grass twine holding it together. Just like time and the elements had held this jar together for thousands of years.

Perhaps this jar was hidden there in a hurry; you, the owner, leaving in a rush thousands of years ago with the intention returning.

Did you feel the fear of an attack?

Anticipate a sudden storm, a flood?

What a beautiful, mysterious tragedy of culture.

This jar was like a newspaper clipping of time slipped into the rocks, a time capsule rendered immobile by the parched desert. That desert that never cries in raindrops but keeps a tight hold on history as a comfort instead.

After a silence, the men debated: leave the jar and risk its subjection to the greed of another, but keeping its story pure, or take the jar to protect it but forever alter its story.

Untouched, they left it.

This jar, in its death, is still flightless, but now alive. It has been returned to life through these

words moving from my headphones to my ears to my brain. I wonder how many other clay

fragments lay scattered in that desert, on this earth. I wonder how many

are undiscovered, how many have

been seen but

left untouched, and

how many

have been

smudged by the

callous hands of curiosity

and greed.

Is this resurrection of stories a sort of justice? Or a disruption?

Somehow a fingerprint on a broken airplane or an ancient seed jar feels wrong, like a marring of time, a stealing of one piece of time and inserting into the present.

But is attempting to tell you the pilot or you the seed jar owner's story with words any better? Is it a satisfactory memorial?

Is it a memorial for you and your story or for the satisfaction of my own peace and curiosity? Should we honor the fragments of the past and leave them untouched? Or should they become part of our own history?

Then again, how many things do we pass by everyday that are a part of a flightless, dead history? Probably too many.

You, the pilot passed away, you the lost seed jar owner, do I have license to retell your rich stories from facts and material evidence alone?

I am not sure, but I tried my best to resurrect you and give you wings.

Is it too much to assume that you would have wanted to emerge from death into life and be given wings?

Maybe you would have rather stayed dead and flightless.

We will never know.

I am sorry if you had hoped not to spend eternity in the ink on this page.

Tell me,
please. Do
you want to stay
lodged in a
capsule of time or do you
want someone to pick up the fragments of your story and piece them back together
like pieces of broken china on a dusty floor? Do not worry, I will be the glue if you ask me to.