

Connecting Flight

This generation will always be homeless.
— Alberto Sandoval Sánchez

If I am really a part of your dream, you'll come back one day.
— Paulo Coelho

1.

When I was young, I never dreamed about flying. Dream dictionaries are clear on the subject: dreams of flight signify personal empowerment, new perspectives, liberation. I would have been in good company, from the Greek legend of Daedalus to Leonardo da Vinci to The Wright brothers, even Superman. But instead of wings, I dreamed of leaping over the carpeted stairs, at least twelve of them, from the second floor landing to the first floor of our house. I think those were dreams. Even now, I am unclear on whether I did jump, or if my memories of landing feet-first on the ground were shattered when I woke. Were those jumps real? Did I dream them all?

Though I never flew in my dreams, I wasn't scared to fly; the first time I took an airplane, I was three months old. The liftoff, the turbulence, even the other passengers, never made me anxious. We flew often when I was a child, but it never bothered me to be moving in mid-air. I liked the sky too much, the clouds, before I could even understand what was holding us aloft.

2.

Erie, Pennsylvania. A gray city, a lake of cracking ice, stretches of highway past abandoned brick buildings, factories with broken windows like pleading eyes. At the local high school, kids skip class to buy watered-down coffee at the convenience store

across the street. As the wind picks up, the rope that holds the American flag rings as it whips against the flagpole. Winter brings potholes and ice dunes by the lake; in the summer, the streets smog up with tourists seeking a spot by the water. The stretch of beach is more dirt than sand, but it turns pockmarked with umbrellas all the same.

Outside the city, the suburban sprawl sleeps, each house complacent on its allotted bed of lawn. Tall shuttered houses, blinking at their identical neighbors, all the lights on inside. Homes, of a sort. Home.

3.

If there were one thing I wish I knew about my birth mother, it would be her hands. Sometimes I pretend that they must be like mine, fingers long, palms creased, cuticles well-bitten. A beauty mark on the back of her left hand, near the side of her wrist on her right. A wide, flat thumbnail on both. I pretend that when I was born, she pressed her short, wide thumbs over my shut eyes, as if she could leave her fingerprints there for me to one day decipher. But this is only a story. When I close my eyes, I don't dream of thumbs or wings. It is just as possible that she tucked her hands away from me, turned her face to the window. Said, *I don't want to see her no I don't want to hold her at all.*

4.

The first time I fly to South Korea, I wake early. My parents drive me to the airport at six, where we wait to hug good-bye. Then I wait just as long behind a gate for

my plane. When we finally board and I find my seat, I'm starving. My dad has left a sticky note in my backpack, next to my granola bar:

Have fun and BE SAFE! We love you!

It's a tiny plane, one that will take me to Cincinnati, where I'll transfer to Chicago, then Seoul. A woman sits with her daughter on the other side of the plane; a minute into eavesdropping, I know they are going to Disney World. "I want to see Mickey!" the girl chirps. Her mother smiles at me.

"Are you going to Cincinnati?"

I am, for some reason, embarrassed. "Actually, I'm going to South Korea."

This provokes a several minute conversation about her friend who is now living in Malaysia with her husband's family, and the culture shock of being in an Asian country. She asks if I have ever been to Disney World. Her daughter looks disappointed when I say no.

As the plane picks up speed on the runway, I lean towards the window and peer at the ground. Just as we are about to lift off, I see a familiar silver van parked on the road outside the runway fence. Two people are leaning against it, waving to me, and the woman across the aisle chuckles when she sees them. "Are those your parents?"

"Yeah," I say, as we are airborne, and I can see the airport from overhead, the treetops, my friend's house, my high school. The silver van disappears from view as roads turn into lines and the clouds take over, but I know they are there, reluctant to drive away from me, still waving to the sky.

5.

Sitting in the Cincinnati airport, I write a good-bye letter to everyone I know, a personal ritual of mine. I compose a new one before every plane ride or surgery, or other potentially death-causing experience. My parents make it onto the list, my college roommate, my ex. I leave a note for my professor but none for the woman who gave birth to me. What is there to say? *I was on my way back, Umma. I was coming back.*

6.

In 1997, professor and cultural theorist Alberto Sandoval Sánchez published an article on the impact of air migration on Puerto Rican identityⁱ. A decade later, one year after flying to Korea, I'll find that his article echoes with startling resonance when I page through it. *After air migration, their identities are at a threshold located between departure and arrival, between one flight and the next one, between here and there.* The words will bear the pressure of my fingerprints, *uprooting, homelessness, exile, return.* My thumb on the next line, *loss.*

Sánchez describes the plane as a liminal state of being, a space neither here nor there, in which everything waits in a state of transition. Afloat, aloft. Its tiny silver body, bridging irreconcilable places. As I read, I'll think of how I was cradled inside, with a handful of passengers held as if in someone's palm, the plane a veritable hyphen between one place and another. Two shorelines, neither one of them a home.

7.

At my Chicago terminal, I fidget, wait. Subconsciously, I seek out white faces, even as I am envious of the hubbub of businessmen anxious to return home. At last, turning away altogether, I watch the plane taxi up the runway towards us. Its many identical windows, like so many half-closed eyes, blinking up at me.

8.

The flight from Chicago to Seoul will take over half a day. As I settle into my aisle seat beside two stoic and suit-clad Korean businessmen, I glance to my right. Across from me sits a girl of six or seven, dark hair and round cheeks a giveaway. She doesn't look far different from pictures of me at that age. There's a family next to her; they're hers, I guess to myself. A white sister, probably eleven or twelve. Her white parents. Her father looks a bit like the father of a friend of mine, which endears him to me. An older white brother. Thirteen? Fourteen? I am bad at guessing ages.

I wonder why they have seated her, the youngest, at the end of the row. Why she is not the center of attention on a trip that I assume is for her. As I watch, the family snaps a laughing picture of each other. She looks at the back of the seat in front of her and smiles a little. I smile, too, but she doesn't see.

9.

Several months before I fly to South Korea, I read *Pamela: A Novel* by Pamela Lu—a small book, a blue book, less than a hundred pagesⁱⁱ. It didn't give me pause when

I first read it, but as the plane reaches to higher altitudes, I think of it again. At the end of the book, the narrator speaks to the experience of flying, and the hours lost on long journeys through the sky. Crossed time zones, missed minutes, the time that passes inside the plane is different than the time that passes outside. In our cradled silver hyphen we slip out of time for a moment, discontinuous, uncontained.

The moments that exist within do not exist outside. As I look across the aisle at my fellow passengers, I count the seconds ticking past and realize that they will disappear. It is Saturday, June 17. When I land, it will be Sunday, June 18, but only barely, according to my watch. In South Korea, it will be late Sunday afternoon. I will, in a sense, have jumped through time.

On my return flight, I will slide backwards; the minutes I'll experience on the plane will not be accounted for when I land. They'll cease to have happened, but for what I remember.

10.

I drift in and out of sleep for a few hours, interrupted periodically by the needs of my seat partners, who rise to go to the bathroom several times. Once, when I open my eyes, the flight attendant is asking the girl across the aisle a polite question in Korean.

“Oh,” her sister says with authority, “she only speaks English.”

I look at the girl again, my unknowing companion, as she gives the flight attendant a shy smile. I wonder what the attendant thinks, meticulously clad in her sea green and white uniform, down to the crisply pressed ribbon in her bun. I wonder if she has children. A daughter? How old? The girl kicks her stocking feet, absently, at the

footrest in front of her. She has a portable Game Boy; it looks used, probably a hand-me-down. As far as I have seen, her parents have spoken to her three or four times the whole flight, and once to admonish her sister for teasing her. I've seen her coloring by herself, or dozing off. I wish I could write her a letter.

I've heard stories of adoptees shunned by native Koreans, as if it were their choice to leave. I was three months old when I first took a plane across the ocean. The date of my admittance to the orphanage is the same date I was born.

Across from me, the girl quietly sips her cup of juice. I feel connected to her, a girl whose name I don't even know, at least ten years younger than me. I wonder if she is scared of what will happen when we touch down. I think for a second, as if I am the one ten years younger, that in an ideal world we could hijack the plane and fly forever, the two of us, never needing to land.

11.

Someone once told me that the birth records of adoptees can lie. Names, supposedly mother-given, might be the choice of the orphanage employees instead; birthdays might be listed as the date of arrival, not the true date of birth. I think of this sometimes and wonder if my birthday is really mine. Perhaps there was a day that has not been accounted for, one day with my birth mother before she gave me up. What would you do in a whole day, just one, with someone you would never see again? I like to think it could have happened. Between leaving her body and leaving her life, there could have been a day, some hours, her hands and my small body, aloft in her arms.

12.

I track our flight on the screen before me, charting the course of the small dot that is our plane, our slow journey, airborne, through the sky. It's a funny word, airborne. Borne up, carried, held. Borne, as in *to bear*, endured by. Or, like birth, to bring forth. The air bears us, endures us, and then it releases us. You have to land. There is no staying forever. You have to go forth, you have to go.

13.

When I wake again, I am offered a warm, wet towel with a pair of tongs, so I take it delicately and unfurl it. The heat is welcome; I wash my face, then my hands, and fold it neatly into a square on the corner of my seatback tray. I want them to think well of me.

When it's meal time, I order the chicken instead of the Korean option. It's not very good. I watch half of a movie, restlessly, then shut my eyes again. We are over Alaska. Russia, perhaps. Someone told me that we were going over the top of the world, instead of directly west. If we landed now, it might be onto ice, or perhaps a near-frozen sea.

I think of crashing: perpetual cold, unforgiving isolation, the sunset still months away.

14.

On my first flight from Korea, a member of the U.S. military accompanied me; since so many military personnel travel back and forth between South Korea and the

United States, they are choice babysitters for the long flight. In my mind, my companion changes every time, from a fresh-faced boy returning from years in and out of Korea's military camp towns to a grizzled man, his children already grown. I wonder if he held me, what he thought. If he had children, maybe the inert weight of me reminded him of them, their laughing voices, sticky hands. If he did not have children, did he want any? Maybe he had for years, maybe his wife couldn't have a baby, maybe his wife was dead.

Maybe he wanted me, the round baby in between parents, in between countries. Maybe he thought about taking me, my hands curled around his scarred, arthritic thumb. Maybe he was thinking of the girls he left behind, old enough to be my mother, for whom babies were a hazard of the job. Or his wife, a tired blonde woman who wrote him every day, what she would say to a baby like me.

Maybe he just held me and we slept together, out of place, out of time. In our little pocket of space, he held me and the airplane held us and the sky held the plane, aloft, aloft, alive.

15.

Before I left for Korea, my mom tucked Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist* into my suitcase, explaining that I should read about a great journey on the way to my ownⁱⁱⁱ. Now, tired of reading, I shut the book and think of her worn white hands, the shapely fingernails, her wedding ring. She is getting the beginning of age spots, a few wrinkles, visible veins. I cannot count how many times those hands have touched me; there is no number for a figure like that.

I think of Erie now, the lake, the sand dunes, the silver van, the street we live on. Our house with the windows lit, and my mom, standing with her palm on the glass, phone in hand, waiting for my call.

16.

Korea will be strange, new, familiar. Millions of faces like mine, busy *ajummas* in street stalls, women who could have borne me, from whom I might have been born. When the sewers flood I will wish for an umbrella even as my toes are submerged. I will look, unconsciously, for a woman with feet like mine.

Yes, this is what will happen:

When I touch down I will let the crowd buffet me out of the airport, to face the line of buses. Men will take my suitcase, my money, without me understanding a word; they will be honest and hand me a ticket, slip my suitcase under the bus. I will stare out the window and think of my mother. Which one, I don't know. I will miss my stop. The subway will bewilder me. At last a cab driver will take pity on me and drive me to my hotel; he, too, will be honest, taking only the bills he deserves when I thrust my money at him helplessly.

In the hotel I will use a phone card to call my mom, then eat more granola bars, too unprepared to venture outside on my own. I will fall asleep with the television on, the light of unfamiliar programs flickering over my face, long streams of chattering voices I do not yet understand. I will not dream of flight or mothers' hands or anything else, just shadows, strange voices, odd shapes of light.

17.

*This wasn't a strange place; it was a new one, I read in *The Alchemist*.*

As Pamela Lu writes, *I had been struck by the passage of time as a spatial passage, which drowned me at random intervals in old familiar places I had never been.*

The plane, says Sánchez, *the space betwixt and between—*

18.

Ten minutes from our landing at Incheon Airport, the man beside me begins chattering in Korean for the first time all flight. I apologize by saying *no*, one of the few words in my vocabulary. It is the first time I have spoken Korean to anyone who knows the language, and those three brief syllables, *an-ni-o*, seem daunting, indecipherable. I suggest, apologetic, *English?*

We converse in staccato English phrases for a minute, establishing that I am studying at Yonsei University for the summer—"Yonsei!" he exclaims in recognition—but he loses interest quickly. When I reach for the gum in my backpack, preparing for landing, he returns immediately to his newspaper. The girl on the other side of the aisle is asleep, feet still shoeless, and I'm ashamed by my ludicrous impulse to take her with me, away from her parents, who are whispering between themselves. The father has already hung his camera around his neck in preparation. The older sister nudges her and she wakes up, sleepy and confused, as her mother tells her to put her shoes on. As she reaches for them, our eyes meet, and I smile at her. She's the one who glances away—taught, I suppose, to avoid the gaze of strangers.

We buckle our seatbelts and return our seats to their upright positions, our tray tables to where they belong. My backpack is properly stowed beneath the seat in front of me, and through the crack of the airplane's window shade, all I can see is white. I must wait to see what lies below, then, until my feet are on the ground. But I know already: there will be no silver van, no waving parents, no familiar faces but those of the people on either side of me, with whom I've spent the last several hours. We will walk through the long airport corridors together, wait single-file in Korea's custom lines. And then, they too will be gone.

We are approaching Incheon and as we bend down to meet the ground rushing up towards us, we all prepare for the impact, that brief touch in which the wheels will meet the runway and we will judder into our landing, like the brush of a hand across a forehead or someone's lips against a cheek, just one place but enough for a memory, or the hope of one.

There is water below us, I can see through the crack in the window shade. For an instant I think we will fall into the churning sea, our windows submerged one by one. We coast on, however, easy as a dream, and then, and then, we land.

ⁱ Sánchez, Alberto Sandoval. "Puerto Rican Identity Up in the Air: Air Migration, Its Cultural Representations, and Me 'Cruzando el Charco.'" *Puerto Rican Jam: Rethinking Colonialism and Nationalism*. Ed. Francis Negrón-Muntaner and Ramón Grosfoguel. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997.

ⁱⁱ Lu, Pamela. *Pamela: A Novel*. Berkeley, CA: Atelos Press, 1998.

ⁱⁱⁱ Coelho, Paulo. *The Alchemist*. New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2006.