



*Manifest destiny? (Venice Beach, California, 1998.
One year after leaving Beijing.)*

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GRAVITY



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Younger—the feeling of a lifetime ago, if you believe in that kind of thing—he would sometimes have a strange, nearly paranormal sense of things impossibly far out of range. Earthquakes, like the way dogs sense them well off, or floods in parts of the world he'd never thought to know, or the suspicion of thunderstorms days and weeks before a weatherman pointed to clouds on a TV forecast. But nobody indulges a child's premonitions; maybe if they had, he would know it more acutely, more precisely, now, that it's coming and how—it's a couple hundred miles away, less than that now, it's some dozen-odd miles—and it's a full sixteen minutes before anyone else on the plane starts to feel it, too, the thing he feels, even if without total certainty. In the hollows of his bones he already knows the first faint shudder that clinks the seltzer and soda cans just a millimeter closer to one another, an imperceptible gesture, as they rattle around the metal carts pushed slowly back down the aisle by flight attendants who're trained to act like they've never done anything else.

“Really hate flying,” the woman next to him sighs, “really, really,” casting a glance, casting a line out, blatantly seeking commiseration.

Her knuckles are shrill white on the armrest between them and she is waiting on him, the chance kindness of a stranger. He has the trapped bystander's obligation to engage: laugh it off, comfort her, say he also hates flying, introduce himself so the small talk nudges out a bit of the anxiety strung through her hands.

He squints, instead, at his feet. At the handle of the scuffed bag toed in between his legs, initials in faded metallic Sharpie.

A second painful try from the neighbor: She's saying something about silliness, about paranoia, and about the smell in the cabin and the roar of—something, moving on to the security of complaints now, before mumbling about other thoughts, distracting thoughts, imagination. Imagine something else, she says to herself. She reminds him of parts of someone. He stretches blindly forward, pretending to not hear, still; hands scramble for something to touch, and then they're flipping through the glossy Sky Mall poking out from the top of the seat-back pocket, and he sinks into a few calm seconds of dog collars and remote-control toothpaste dispensers.

In the two-inch gap between the seats in front of him, a couple sits with their heads turned toward one another, thumbs close, taking turns skating across one another. The glint of a ring, or—a cheap plastic one, maybe? It's the wrapper of a piece of gum, twined around the girl's fourth finger. A joke. Some kind of joke. He'd give it six months, he thinks, the thought aimlessly flitting in his head and then out again as something else—much sharper—blows past his spine, leaving not quite a chill but a splinter, a discomfort that makes him shift in his own seat, crack his neck to the right, turn out to the window where the clouds are dancing, still, entirely unaware.

Imagine another world:

"I want to know," Annabel had said—and when was this, last year, last week, some film reel of hours and hours spools out of time the way memories are wont to when left alone too long, each toppling onto the next—the important thing is she had said it: "what scares you more than anything," and it was not a question, her sentences

always too quick and flat to catch on as queries. They were obstructions. They were nails pounded into a wall and they left holes when they were taken away. Her fingers were tangled into the hair at the base of his neck as she said it. Muscle memory kicks in now: The hard mattress of her attic apartment, its windows dressed in bedsheets as drapes, the dirty, sickly orange carpet invisible in the blackness. It was always a game of hiding.

Imagine a lifetime out of it. Do it, while you have the time, take one breath to be there again. Imagine the safety of that god-awful place, four walls around and none of them curving apart, about to burst out into the sky.

Blink tight; he squeezes until the dark behind his eyelids is no longer dark, but a thousand pinpricks of color. Looks up at the row in front, at that couple again, their fingers in steeples together, the boy's jacket sleeve tucking its way into her palm. It reminds him of sloping church roofs. And it is unfathomable, he thinks, with his heart suddenly aware of itself and a stickiness pooling underneath his armpits: Imagine a universe full of only cathedrals. Imagine streets made of only these hulking buildings with their arches and condemning windows and buttresses like wings, lifting up, taking themselves wherever they want to go, perhaps sometimes offering you the grace—

Imagine living weightless among the birds, never looking down—

No, but this is worse: Imagine a world that simply is yours but isn't. One in which your mother does not, for instance, need you to turn two decades older before finally answering the question you most desperately wanted answered, and only after Annabel shoves the phone into your hands. Or one where the teacher in school says the right thing—only earlier. And what about the worlds that won't ever be? (Something clinks too loud now, in the cabin, doesn't anyone else notice.) Imagine that one autumn, the most important one. The end of summer takes you by surprise, that year. You still get violet scratches from the too-low pine branches in your face as you're trying to navigate foreign terrain

in the dark and rain, and you still duck into the café six minutes before closing time, rivulets of blood running comic-dramatically down the right side of your neck, and the barista backs slowly away from the countertop—but in this world, the girl you're supposed to be meeting, the one whose scant information you only know from the ad she'd posted on a bulletin board, she is also running late, and she doesn't make it in time to make a jab at you for your serial-killer appearance and pay for your coffee and learn your name. Or let's say she does make it, but you don't spot her before she curses and realizes she left the kettle on at home. You don't meet and ninety-six days later you don't suddenly feel frightened to death—paralyzed, with a fucking *feeling*, of all things—when you watch her mouth turn down in disappointment at something that was meant to be a compliment.

But this exercise, it's—"Pointless," he says aloud to his neighbor, startling her. Imagine meeting Annabel or not meeting her. It's all the same, you already know this: your heart breaks in any case, any other universe in which she could be, wherever you go, however you could have known or not known her, because you won't be seeing this again, so you get to bend the rules a little bit, you get to cheat, romanticize. In sixteen minutes you get to reinvent the world.

When the pilot's teetering-on-panic voice finally comes over the speaker system, fast-breathing but still trying for some composure, saying to a hundred confused passengers that everything will be all right, Jamie is busy thinking of skyscrapers, of standing atop tall, tall ladders and cranes, and what it would be like to lift the beams into place, again and again. He is thinking of deep-sea diving. He is thinking of the useless things purchased from the magazine in his hands that people still believe they want.

Somebody, inevitably, screams. It might be the woman sitting next to him in the soon-to-not-be cabin. All that Jamie hears is his own voice spun and looped back to him from forever ago, it must've been a lifetime at this point, it will certainly be so soon, saying back to

Annabel—“Not having the time,” he had said. “Not being everywhere at once,” and she had slotted her fingers in between his, she had closed her eyes, she had not made a sound.

