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Airborne

flight's greatest gift is to let us look around.
—William Langewiesche, *Inside the Sky*

I'm flying, with windows for wings. Under my nose—literally—are things I would not know any other way, for example, that the predominant color of city lights at night is gold.

There are also facts that other folks might figure out some other way, but which have come to me only by pressing my nose to the Plexiglas. For instance, how the design of most golf courses is fan-folded, and how it is possible for people to drive right past huge quarries and never see them. How the circular pivot-irrigation fields of Oklahoma are racked together like billiard balls for hundreds of square miles, yellow ones, orange ones, lavender, rusty gold, every shade of green. How horseshoe bends in rivers become, in time, lonely oxbow lakes. How trees follow even dry watercourses. How roads don't take you to all the places that are.

Some of this is window-seat trivia, of limited interest. I am after the big picture, or at least, *a* big picture. What I've figured out so far is this: that from high above, the topography bursts through everything manmade, overwhelms it, and that, from up there, those landforms are astonishingly beautiful. There are people who disagree—the late geographer John Brinkerhoff Jackson, the writer and pilot William Langewiesche, and the photographer Emmet Gowin, who feel the view from the sky reveals, primarily, not the earth's brilliant geology but the tracks and designs of humans upon it. All of these men, though, I would note, have done their observing at small-plane altitudes, flying much lower than I do.

In Gowin's photographs, eerie, wondrous landscapes wear the scars of our scribing and digging, from nuclear test craters and bomb disposal sites to silver mine tailings and abandoned desert trailer parks, though even in these dark pictures there are lovely shapes—the loops and spirals of off-road vehicle tracks on salt flats, the perfect roundness of a giant pivot-irrigation field made delicate by a dusting of snow. Georgia O'Keeffe had a different vision from the air, which I feel closer to—after a round-the-world airplane tour in 1959 she painted pictures of what she'd seen out the window; *Sky Above Clouds IV* is an endless flat sea of little white pancakes stretching far away to a faintly pink horizon, an image of unbelievable serenity. But of course, she was flying at a higher altitude than those others, and she did not look down, but out, at the clouds.[1]

Too low or too high, and the view I crave is altered—pictures taken from the space shuttle sweep in too much, at too great a distance; geological features are lost, land masses start to look like maps. Satellite images of the Grand Canyon, as historian Stephen Pyne puts it, "[reduce] its immense complexity to the status of a mudcrack." (Planes are prohibited from flying directly over the canyon, but they tell me on some routes it can be seen from not too far away.) Astronauts always talk in bland platitudes about the beauty of the Earth from orbit. I have no doubt they are overcome by the view and find it hard to describe their feelings, but I also think they're vague because what they're seeing is vague, losing definition.

Mine is an ordinary airline passenger's view, from an ordinary, cramped, tweedy-upholstered seat by a little oval window, call it 38F or 11A. Cruising altitude is what I've got—what so many of us have got, herded aboard and packed in like the human cargo we are, on our way to meetings and vacations and Thanksgivings and weddings. I am sympathetic to those who prefer aisle seats, who have other things they want to do—read, sleep, watch the movie. Sometimes my eyes almost hurt. I squeeze them tight, like some little kid, but then they pop open again. I pray for clouds, the thick kind that are nothing to look at.

I am not unsociable. Flying offers natural opportunities for chitchat with the neighbors. On a recent trip I sat beside a paralegal from Brooklyn and, in the aisle seat, a seventeen year old reading a book of funny facts. The paralegal was sipping at his plastic cup of white zinfandel, the seventeen year old was giggling over his book, and I was looking out the window. We'd already done

the *who are you* and *what are you* and *why are you going* so I felt comfortable saying "Hold up, I have an announcement."

The paralegal set down his wine. The giggler lowered his book to his lap. They'd seen nothing but the back of my head for the last ten minutes, but now my face was turned on them like the sun. They shrank back from the light, their kidneys pressed against the armrests. "The country underneath us," I told them, "has turned flat!"

No reaction.

"It's official," I added. "The country is officially flat now."

"That's cool," said the paralegal.

"Yeah," said the teenager.

"It'll stay flat," I said, "till we reach the Rockies." They nodded; they understood. "There's this river down there—the land's kind of rolling and hilly on one side, flat as a pancake on the other." I knew flat as a pancake was a cliché, but at that moment it conveyed absolute flatness better than anything else I could think of. I turned back to look, but the river was gone. I saw squares of green and brown, and roads that crossed at right angles and ran straight forever.

I love to just stare at these things that pass beneath me, but there's more to it—the big picture that I want to understand is, partly, about the variety of human impulses embedded down there that can be discerned from high above. In this way, my interests are not so different from those of people like Langewiesche and Gowin. Some impulses are specific to certain places, for instance, the way Manhattan, from the air, is so clearly a human eruption *straight up* (although even Manhattan, viewed from the right altitude, is defined not by its population density but by the chunk of rock between two rivers that it stands on; it is an island with a city on it, not a city on an island).

Some of our impulses are more widespread, more general, like the tendency to settle at the edges of exposed places, not in the middle, and along rivers wherever they are found, and to congregate in clumps large and small—there's something comforting about these patterns of habitation, viewed from the air. Nothing looks warmer to me than flying into a city, out of the dark interior places, at night—the lights, red and white against the blackness, each a point of life.

Other revealing human tendencies include the ranch-driveway phenomenon, out in the flattest, emptiest parts of Texas and Oklahoma. This is the tendency of those long drives back to the ranch house not to run straight, like all the roads in those parts, but instead go straight only at first and then

swerve, or dogleg, or even carve out a big S curve. As if their owners were overcome by a need to break with that landscape, to soften it before they could bear to drive across it. Every driveway a little different from the neighbors' driveways (neighbors separated by miles, driveways each maybe a mile—or more?—long), the owners' way of asserting their creativity, their uniqueness, in this harsh land that would make anyone feel small. I cannot help but project myself there, on the ground, driving on some road, looking across the empty land to the dust plume sent up by a pickup truck flying down one of those S curves. No straight-line plume, but a shape-shifting thing, appearing to pinch or stall where the truck turns in my direction, then stretching again, opening up, as it turns another way.

The big picture I'm after is also heavily geological. In the U.S., the whole story down there is wet-to-dry (east to west) or dry-to-wet (west to east), with the westward direction, flying into the dry, edging out the other for dramatic impact. It starts in the tightly wound northeast, where the woods and farms are crammed together and the fields are crazy shapes like Aztec animals, then slips over the woolly Appalachians and on to the Midwest, where the world turns flat and the perfect squares of the grid appear, the grid that laid out America's settlement west in the days of the Homestead Act. Everything is green, and the towns are small and many, and relatively close together—it looks neighborly and productive down there. And then the change, continuing west—its gradual nature is its great fascination: the green slowly dulls, the squares get larger, the clouds disappear. The rivers, revealed by the dense, dark lines of the trees that follow them, go winding across the flat land, like tortuous varicose veins. The squares take on new colors, dun, mauve, and pinkish hues, and bits of bright irrigated green. Those varicose watercourses begin to eat into the land, shallow precursors of canyons. The grid gets ever larger, whole blocks of it missing, soon the blocks are big enough whole towns fit within a block with room to spare. The irrigation circles appear, visually breaking the grid, and then they cease, and the land is creased and parched, the remains of the grid just ghost-lines now, broken everywhere by the twisting, deep arroyos. There are cattle down there—the occasional salt lick or water tank is visible from the faint starburst around it, the rays of the star formed by the tracks of the cows. The creases become canyons, and they widen, and widen more, until they are not canyons but great flat expanses, and the high lands that are left between them are mesas.[2]

All of this is only the beginning: the Rockies lie just west, and then the true deserts on the other side of them. About the Rockies, all I can say is how amazingly cool it is to fly right over a knife-edge ridge, like a photographer on an Imax movie. From the air, much of what you see is the zone above the tree line—different from how the mountains look if you're down in them, looking up at the evergreens and aspen. Bare rock and scree are predominant, their dull color hard to describe—like the gray of a newborn's eyes before the pigment appears. In winter, of course, there is much more snow, but in summer it is dotted along the rock, in its hollows and turns, as if dabbed by a Q-tip. I see countless places where I know no human has ever stood. It is beautiful where the sun hits the rock: golden.

Southern Utah lets me pretend I am a space explorer, orbiting an alien planet. Bizarre, colorful, pink and rose and cream wild-ass canyonlands. Depending where the plane is headed, I might get the strange, gray Mojave, which in places loses its scale utterly at 30,000 feet—could be a pile of mud at my feet, half washed away from a thunderstorm—or the wondrous basin and range of Nevada, where long straight ridge and bare wide plain, and long straight ridge and bare wide plain, on and on, dozens of them, pass under me. It's the emptiest country I've ever seen, more vacant somehow than Utah or the Mojave, because of that repetition, I suppose. Because of those wide flat basins, and the loneliness of those long, meandering ridge lines, which have names on maps but don't from up here. The country is colorless, not really gray, not really beige.

It's an illusion, of course, the perfection of the land seen from that altitude, as Gowin's photographs remind me. Way up there, I can't see the missile silos he sees, and I can't see broken glass in vacant lots, or people panhandling, or billboards, or giant flags over car dealerships. Rural poverty is completely invisible, since I can see settlement only where it is clustered. What I think of the world is entirely altitude dependent—again, I need to be not too high, not too low, but in between, like Goldilocks, situated just right, just so, between heaven and earth. Admittedly, my view from up there is a distortion, even though it's the real thing I'm looking at, not pictures of it. But I could make a case that if the view from the air is distorted, maybe the view from the ground is too, and the truth lies somewhere between the air and the earth. That each should concede something to the other. And maybe I see what I *want* to see. But it's still what I see. Why do I feel a little defensive here, for thinking the earth is beautiful? It *is* beautiful—look at it. Perhaps the weight of sadness in

the world is too much, and we can never consider beauty completely apart from it.

Oddly, I have less sense of the land when my feet are on the ground—my line of sight is so limited—but from the air all I see is rock, water, rock, trees, rock. And if I am lucky enough to fly all the way to the edge, I see ocean, extending out of sight forever, a reminder there is more world out there to see, simply a matter of getting on the right airplane.

Here's something I wonder about, when I go flying around: why do I feel a need to link what I see out the window to a map in my mind? Why is it important to me to wonder, are we still over Wyoming? In my worst moments, I have silently shrieked *would somebody lay a map over this thing?* Some airlines have television monitors above the aisles that periodically flash maps of where the plane is, a fun feature until the in-flight movie puts an end to all that and I am hurled out over the middle of the country, uprooted, hapless, soon lost.

On any flight, there are parts where I feel situated, and parts where I have to let it go. Even if I had maps, I don't know that I would use them; they are too unlike the terrain they depict—the roads out the airplane window, for example, are dwarfed by what's around them, nothing like the bold red and blue lines that dominate paper. The shapes of the states, the boundaries between them, so deeply engrained in the picture files of our brains, simply do not exist on the ground, but the acceptance of that, over the course of an airplane flight, comes gradually. It begins with resistance, as the plane leaves the ground, particularly if I'm starting from the familiar territory of home. At first, I delight at the landmarks I know and am pleased at how much sense a lot of it makes, but sooner or later I get lost (frustrated because I don't know "where I am"—over Tennessee or Kentucky, someplace like that? Would that be the *Ohio* River?). I am forced to give up trying to identify everything and simply shift to thinking, *that's a river, that's a road up a mountain*, and at that moment I tremble on the threshold of an alien country, where I will see how things are laid out, what nature and man have done, but I won't know what anything is. The most interesting point is when I'm right on the edge between those two zones, the half grasped and the unknown, and I'm wavering, feeling myself slip into a new way of seeing.

Resistance gives way to acceptance and finally elation as I realize these landscapes exist and are what they are *without* being called anything, something like the Garden of Eden before Adam started hanging name tags on the animals, and that the land is a *whole*, that there is nothing about it that

exists in parcels, nothing that can be divided from anything else, even though the transitions, in places, can be abrupt—the lifting of the Sierra Nevada, for example, out of California's Central Valley. The slow movement of the view out the window underscores this seamlessness (at cruising altitude, a feature on the ground takes about two and a half minutes to transit the window). This pace is slow enough to let me study and ponder, while always offering new stuff to look at, continually displacing what I've caught in the frame. [3]

Once, I saw a strange line of futuristic white towers atop the long, crenellated edge of a mesa east of Albuquerque. At first I thought, microwave antennas? But there were too many, arranged too purposefully, and they were far below but they were so *white*. They were windmills. I stared at them, and the cliff edge on which they stood, for a full two and a half minutes. I knew we had just passed Albuquerque only because the pilot came on and told us. I was grateful, it helped me situate the sight, but I hadn't seen Albuquerque, it must have been on the other side of the plane, and it made me think how every flight is tracing its own unique trajectory, dividing the planet into port and starboard and giving me just a sampling of the earth below, reminding me that even though the view out my window looks wide, I am seeing very little.

It is hard, in the end, to escape the tyranny of place names and maps. On a flight back from Phoenix once with my sister, we used one of the airline's cocktail napkins, which featured a map of the U.S. with the airline's routes all over it, to locate ourselves as we looked out the window. We suffered incapacitating attacks of giggles (giddy and fatigued from travel) imagining the pilot navigating with the same paper napkin.

But the desire to understand where you are is natural enough, and it is thrilling to recognize exotic physical features from the air. Flying over Yosemite—*there's Half Dome!*—and out of the disorienting wilds of the Mojave, the *Salton Sea*, unmistakable. Once I saw a red rock place in the desert that had to be Sedona. And flying over what was clearly the Mississippi, recognizing Memphis on its east bank (*yes, that must be Memphis*), seeing in fact the I-40 bridge over the river, which connects Memphis, and everything that is Tennessee and everything that is the east, to the endless flats of Arkansas and all that lies beyond, a bridge I had in fact crossed once on my way west—I felt pulled out of my window seat, pulled down there with superhero zoom-lens eyes, all the way down to that bridge, where I remembered so vividly the sign halfway across: a sign for the interstate that should have had a red and blue shield with "I-40" on it above a separate rectangle saying "west" but which was missing the

shield part, so the bridge out of Memphis, across the Mississippi, had hanging on it only that single word, *west*.

It's a private showing, the in-flight movie out my window, but I see other people looking, too, sometimes. It's possible to peer forward down that crack between the seats and the wall, maybe three or four rows, until a shoulder, an arm, a head leaning into that space blocks the view. There I can see (though he doesn't see me) a guy absorbed in studying the world below, though his face, turned as it is to the window, is hidden. Maybe somebody three rows back from me has watched me, too—no way to know. The window seat of a commercial jet is one of the most private spaces in the public places we inhabit. The high seat backs separate you from the other passengers, the white noise of the engines blurs the sound around you. No one can see the expression on your face as you gaze, dreamy, then suddenly start at some new vision: a field of sand dunes, a pocket of them in the rain shadow of some mountain, a strange sandy-pink color, all rippled like cake icing.

I often get to airports early, not because of security, or worry about delays or ticket lines. I arrive early so I can be in Group A, if I'm flying on a certain discount airline that does not believe in assigned seats, but instead labels their passengers As and Bs and Cs. When I look down and see that giant A in big black print on my boarding pass I am at peace, because I know I'll get a window seat—no one can prevent my getting one. And yea, though I walk down the aisle with a B on my pass sometimes, I fear not, for chances are if I'm near the front of the B group and willing to walk to the back of the plane, I can still get a window.

I have a recurring fantasy of boarding a plane and usurping someone's window seat, kicking him or her out of there, explaining I'm sorry, I *have* to have this seat, because I'm writing an essay about things you see out the window—I need to work here. I've got work to do. And I could keep using this, doing this to people, long after the writing was done, why not? Who would know?

I used to think I practiced this window-seat obsession in honor of my ancestors who never saw, who never dreamed of seeing—who never dreamed of what they'd see if they could see—the topside of a cloud. (Don't get me started on clouds: clouds like the soft batting that quilters use to stuff their quilts; clouds that are thin and gauzy like wet tissue that's pulling apart; popcorn clouds, floaty little things, casting shadows like splats of purple paint on the fields below; clouds that carry their sail aloft like clipper ships, their color,

in that clear, thin air something a paint company would call "Painful White.") But now I think I do it to honor, not their unimagined chance to see the tops of clouds, but their unimagined view of the earth, of the land. Until a few decades ago, nobody flew. My grandmother never flew; it never occurred to her. The Wright Brothers took off just over one hundred years ago, and all the generations before, who never conceived of paved roads, let alone airplanes, had no idea of looking down from above to see what farms and towns and mountains looked like from up there. Now it's so commonplace that many people prefer aisle seats; we feel we are *made* to go up in planes, that we are parked in the air, in a dead space between origin and destination, so different from a trip in a car or on a train which lets you feel the passing through.

When I fly, I don't often think of the people on the ground, but if I try I can imagine the ghosts of the ones who never flew, down there, looking up at the sky. And I think of those ranchers, the ones with the driveways that carve great curves across the dust—I think of them, far below, looking up to note the progress of my jet plane over their world. Ian Frazier, in *Great Plains*, describes their view: "In New Mexico and west Texas, the hard white sky is screwed onto the earth like a lid . . ." What a rush, to be a part of that sky! Although maybe, to them, my plane mars their sky. Once again, perceptions can be altitude dependent.

Beauty, as they say, is in the beholder's eye. And this thought gets me thinking again about where beauty fits in. I think of Emmet Gowin's photographs—the role of art is to agitate. It is meant to take us to edges we don't normally look over. Art's function is also to let us see things we already see but in new ways. This can include showing us beauty we did not realize—I think, here, of O'Keeffe's clouds.

For my part, I am privileged to be a collector of airborne miracles. Here's the last one I'll share: flying out of Fort Lauderdale at night, swinging out over the Atlantic and then slowly banking around over the land to head north, the view of Florida's east coast below, twinkling, glittering in the dark, with the great black ocean beyond. But then, continuing to fly inland and suddenly seeing the glitter-line stop, nothing but darkness beneath us. Wait, I thought, this can't be right, this can't be the Gulf of Mexico. What we'd just flown over was too narrow to be the whole width of the Florida peninsula. And we had no reason to fly out over the Gulf—we were supposed to be headed north. But there it was, black empty void beneath us. I told myself *think!* and then I got it: Everglades. Dark in there.

We flew into overcast—nothing quite like that, flying at night in clouds. It was dark out the window but the flashing lights on the wings lit up the cloud in pulses. Between each flash, I was left with my own reflection in the window, a double reflection because of the inner and outer window. I could see solidly only where the two overlapped, and where they didn't overlap the images were blurred, transparent, so I could see through myself, through my wrists, my fingers. It was all very dim, I couldn't see my own face at all; the jewelry on my hands and wrists picked up the little light there was. After spending so much time looking out the window, extending outward, over crystal-sharp vast expanses, I was being drawn back in, I was losing clarity, I was thrown back on myself. It was curious and quiet and close; it was a strange trip.

What a contrast with the big blue sky: how when the plane makes a turn, and the wings dip, and the side I'm sitting on gets canted up toward the sky, and I see that powerful cerulean blue fill the screen of my window. I used to feel it was taking my view away from me; now I accept it as my cue to look up, into that great blue space, to be reminded that the earth is not just a landscape below, but a planet hanging in the heavens.

Notes

[1] An exception to the low-flying critics is Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, who flew small planes but was enraptured by everything he saw. He flew, however, in the 1920s and 1930s in places that were little disturbed by human progress—the Pyrenees, the Sahara. "How empty of life is this planet of ours!" he says in *Wind, Sand, and Stars*. "What a deal of the earth's surface is given over to rock and sand!"

[2] Flying the other way, west to east, the land gradually smoothes, becomes less incised. The mesas that stand above the desert floor get broader, then turn into a single flat table that has canyons cutting into it; the visual effect is of the land turned inside out. The dim lines of the grid appear, where people have tried to map out squares, ranging and irregular: wishful-thinking squares. I have to remind myself, flying west to east, that the people moved the other way—the squares didn't appear and define gradually, rather, they disappeared, slowly, as they became harder to maintain, as the land got drier and drier.

[3] Treating the window as a clockface and sitting, say, on the port side of the plane, two and a half minutes is the time it takes something to travel from three o'clock to nine; a feature noted at four o'clock and followed to its disappearance at eight o'clock takes about a minute and forty seconds, because it is closer. Changing one's position, of course—shifting forward to prolong the look back—can buy more time.