

BEFORE LANDING

the plane
made its descent
into the storm clouds.
Everything began to shake.
The passengers tensed
as our plastic interior rattled.
Outside the window,
a red strobe lit
thousands of raindrops
speeding past like bullets,
beating red into the deep,
dark clouds surrounding us,
crashing like waves
against a ship
midway over the Atlantic—
a black abyss
that looked like it could
swallow us whole.
It groaned
and licked the wings
with its elephant tongue.
We held hands.
You closed your eyes to pray
(which surprised me),
and my thoughts raced:
What if this is the last day?
Did I do it right?
Did I appreciate things enough?
What are we doing in the sky?
Do we belong here,
or is this the price we pay
for wanting too much?
I spoke with an old friend
before the flight, which we never do—
perhaps that was our farewell,
perhaps he felt it in his bones
when he decided to call.
(The very thought of death
turns us all to mystics,
defying our weakling wits.)
The back of the plane jerked up.
A group of children laughed—
too young to worry
about life and death.

A man turned to look at them,
smirking, confident
this was all fine, normal.
I was embarrassed
he'd seen my face—
pale with horror,
perplexed, unprepared.
I clenched your hand tighter
and said, "I love you."
(Have I loved you enough?)
The plane rumbled,
the red light beat,
my heart rose
to the top of my chest,
breaking sweat,
twisting and turning
in my head:
all my regrets,
all I ought to cherish—
if this is the end,
our last syllable:
that you are here,
that we have hands
with fingers woven
into one—
that your heart
lights our way
to dusty death,
that a poor player,
in his hour, found you
flickering amid the fog.
But then the clouds began to fade.
I saw Minneapolis below,
city lights rising to greet us
as we steadied
into a smooth descent.
Catching our breath,
you said, "Scary,"
with eyes wide and bright
like full moons.
And when we reached the ground,
the passengers applauded.
A flight attendant came
on the intercom to say:
"Amen. We landed."
I slowed my breathing.

Was there need for terror?
How suddenly one is made
to look into the eyes of death—
indeed, how quickly
one can die.
After unloading the plane,
the passengers
waited on the street,
packing their bags into taxis
to be carried their separate ways
through the midnight rain.