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Australia from the Ground

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I was on my way home from school one day when a plane fell out of the sky. In my head, it fell slow. Fluttering through the icy air like a tattered newspaper, weathering as it grew closer to the ground, and at some point, late in the game of falling to Earth, surrendering to the burning winds and scalding machinery that ate away at the metal bird from the inside out, sacrificing the boxy pleather suit cases, the tacky airport purchases from duty free emporiums, the plush hypoallergenic neck pillows, and then last, but certainly not least, like the burnt bits at the bottom of the pan, the tender, bleeding bodies, slicing the sky all at once — coach and first class descending to the world below at the same mind-bending speed, making way for some hard truth about the meaninglessness of money and wealth in the grand scheme of things, but really meaning and proving nothing at all, but the blistering toxicity of crisp air, when thirty-three thousand feet of it exist between you and a frosty, Ukrainian corn field.¹

It was the seventeenth of July, the dead of an Australian winter. I wore a navy and scarlet pinstriped blazer. My braids were bound by two red ribbons. I was worn from a long day of trying desperately to be liked by my circle of hot blonde friends, by my rude English teacher, by a boy named Greg in my history class with dimples and straight Ds. It was my tenth month in Melbourne, and I had somehow managed to become simultaneously bored and over stimulated, an unlikely, yet apparently possible combination of emotional states. I'd trail planes overhead, following their frothy paths with my eyes, desperate to be on board. I could hear the hum of the engine, the crinkling of the ever-present, precautionary paper vomit bag as I fought to fit my water bottle in the mesh pocket against my shins. When I thought hard enough, I could cloud my vision with the orange glow of the seatbelt sign, I could see the dull mosaic of miniature televisions playing on and on in the rows ahead. I envied the passengers. I wanted to go home, or if not home, anywhere else, but suddenly the sky had proven itself unsafe, fair game for pro-Russian separatists and rebel militants, and I decided that I was stuck.

Flight MH17 was en route from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur.² I'd never been to either, but perhaps I'd been above the same open land in between, the same seas, the same forests and frozen lakes as I made the odyssey home

1 ² Dir. CGTN America, *Cause of MH17 Crash by Dutch Safety Board* (San Bruno: YouTube, 2015)

and back each Christmas. I studied the flight maps, measuring my routes against that of the two hundred eighty three passengers and fifteen crewmembers on board. I scaled the curvy blue line with my pointer finger, tracing my path in the sky from Melbourne's Tullamarine Airport (MEL) to Abu Dhabi (AUH), and then from Abu Dhabi to New York (LGA). I looked for overlaps, and upon finding that there was, for a brief moment, a convergence in our paths above the North end of the black sea, preceded to devour a meat pie the size of a fist on the floor of my bedroom, an unsuccessful attempt at absorbing my horror with filo dough and ground beef.

The crash loomed heavy on my mind at school the next morning. Monique and I change into our gym uniforms. She talks about her date with Alex Keser. He touched her breasts last night, but she isn't sure whether or not he meant to because he just kind of grazed them with the palm of his hand when he reached for the television remote. She says he flinched. This leads her to question his sexuality. I wonder why it matters which gender Alex Keser would rather bone now that we know it's possible for us to die midair without warning. "It's different for her," I remind myself, "She isn't worried about getting home, she's *already* home."

I worry more about getting home when I get home to my so-called home on the eleventh floor of a modern apartment building in the heart of Melbourne's central business district. I eat my low-fat cottage cheese, a snack that I've recently come to believe is palatable, but am destined to lose interest in soon after my mother arrives home from the grocery store, having purchased the outcast dairy product in bulk. I track the calories on my smart phone, in-putting the half-cup of cottage cheese alongside the rice cake and tablespoon of peanut butter I ate at lunch. I go about my mid-afternoon routine, suppressing the voice at the back of my mind that implores, "Who cares if you're skinny when there's a Soviet era Buk missile launcher quietly purring between you and everything you care about 10,359 miles away?"³

The missile travelled at three times the speed of sound.³ The air was still as the guided warhead stalked its prey, searching the sky for a ten-year-old girl named Evie and her two brothers, Mo and Otis.⁴ They were on their way home to Perth, a reasonably sized city on Australia's Western coast. The warhead

2 ³ "MH17 Victims May Have Been Conscious After Missile Struck, Experts Say." (New York: Time Incorporated)

3 ⁴ Nina Galgowski, Michael Walsh, Meg Wagner, "Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17 Crash Victims Revealed." (New York: New York Daily News, 2014)

made their acquaintance from just beyond the steel walls of the cockpit before reaching toxic orgasm, a ballistic, mile high tantrum. A close friend of the family speaks out in the days following the crash; she calls them “beautiful, beautiful kids. Gentle, kind, beautiful kids.”⁴ It’s July 19th and I am awake in my bed, obsessing over the details of their last recollections of life on Earth as gentle, kind, beautiful kids with strong, beating pulses and arteries that balloon with blood at all the right times.

I wondered hard about what they saw if they saw anything at all, and if they didn’t see, what they heard, as their perfect, little bodies were removed from their control all at once. I wondered whether they drenched their city on the Western coast with the same adoring light with which I drenched mine, as I inhabited theirs joylessly, ignoring all that was home to them as I ached desperately for my own in an entirely separate hemisphere.

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