

DeWitt Henry

GRAVITY

I think of little deaths, a sneeze, an orgasm; how close such seizures are at once to vacancy and to the utter concentration of black holes, pure gravity. At once experience past will, past memory or thought; and an absence too, a non-experience. Comatose, the epileptic fit; no chance to dream. And yet like dreams, I hear reports of near-death experiences. My mother, after a worst of worsening episodes of heart failure, "They threw me back, like an undersized fish." Or on the talk shows, or in movies, survivors reporting, as if abducted by aliens. "I rose up out of my body, weightless, and was looking down at myself as the surgeons kept working on my open heart." Or before airplanes, let alone manned space flight, the poet's vision of Troilus slain: "His lighte ghost ful blisfully is went / Up to the holownesse of the seventh sphere . . . And down from thennes faste he gan advise / This litel spot of erthe, that with the sea embraced is." I think of weight, of burdens, of things we carry; of freedom birds, carrying us home. Of Walden Pond, the poet's fact; still waters I wade into this midlife summer's day, the sudden drop from shallow shelf to cliff-steep depths, buoyed up, treading and paddling; impulse, then, to plummet, deep breath, feet together pointing down, and arms outstretched, lifting to push down, again, again, the downward glide from surface, greenish light and body temperature, to cold, dark, and colder, and pressure's crush, one body's length, one fathom, two at most, blood's beat and thunder, nothing below, all depth and fathomless, and could go deeper, could stand more, but panicking and choosing to rise, as if below would be some point beyond return, past choice. The desperate rising then, the scramble, craving surface, air, as if beyond my reach, flutter kicks and climbing strokes, faster, nearer, out, and breaking into air, and light, gasping, sunlit world of other waders, parents, children, youths, and swimming in, first touch of bottom, standing, eyes and nose and mouth above the water, while checking on the shore, the languid eyes of strangers, oiled shoulders, tummies, and bikinied breasts. Then out, and down again, again, but each time rising, having touched in emptiness some point of dread.

Years ago, my oldest brother visited me and my young family in Boston from his home in the Colorado Rockies. He flew cross country in a four-seater,

single-engine, bi-plane, a 1939 Grumman Staggerwing, which had been built for long-distance flight, used for carrying mail, and later for submarine hunting during World War II; when I'd been married, he had flown the same plane to Florida, and had stood as my best man. He had rebuilt the plane himself, from motor to wing struts, and used it for his construction business. He loved to give us turns at flying it, or at least at holding the stick and steering crescent. That visit to Boston was my first turn, with my wife Connie and our four-year old Ruth in the back seat. I was accustomed to commercial jets, the rush and surge of take off, flattening me against my cushioned seat; the cumbersome lift, and climb and ground falling away, atilt. In the Staggerwing, I discovered the unnaturalness of flight, the violence in defying gravity with thrust. The huge single propeller engine, with its exposed ring of carburetors, following on my brother's priming, as first, outside, he pulled full weight on the propeller, suddenly coughing to life, revving full, as inside we were buckled in and he managed the throttle. The roar, deafening, throatier than a diesel truck or fire engine. The alarm of our fragility, seated behind what seemed to be the world's largest and most powerful fan, which Jack throttled down for taxiing, then having been cleared on the radio for take off, throttled up, let strain and shake, then brake off, let propel us, noise and power beyond imagining; until, rolling forward, ground speed gathering 30 to 50 to 65 mph, he pulled the stick back, and we lifted free, our climb abrupt and steep and the motor at its peak, churning, sawing and tunneling hugely into air. Later, once we had leveled off at our altitude, some seven or eight thousand feet, cleared with radio control, and above and below at different times, spotted and followed other small planes passing, Jack let me take the stick and steer. Go on, take it up to ten, he urged, and cleared it on the radio; just pull back, that's it, easy, feel it. Like swimming, free to head anywhere, it seemed, the vastness of choice, bank left, bank right, gently level. I'd grown accustomed to the motor's pitch, the roaring and vibrations, to shouting over the noise, to the boring fact of landscape below. I headed for the only mountain on the horizon, landmark for Framingham, some fifty miles distant. I was flying.

The weightlessness of grace, Nureyev in ballet, Jordan in basketball. Defying gravity, floating, unnaturally and wonderfully free. But only through the costs of discipline, muscular strength and peak conditioning, distilling weight to power and purpose. The rise from anonymity to self, like that. From mud to stateliness and love, perhaps.

Another time, the worst year in our lives, July 4, 1985. I was struggling with the uncertainty of my infertility after two years of trying for a second child, and a gauntlet of treatments, this month a pregnancy maybe, this month, but the passing time and disappointment was taking a toll on Connie. We went into couples counseling. My closest friend, Richard Yates, who had moved to Boston, was having breakdowns, in and out of hospitals. My mother was living out her months of dying in her home outside Philadelphia. My bid for tenure at Emerson College, my only paid job, was in political jeopardy on campus. My novel manuscript was repeatedly rejected.

Ruth was eight years old. She begged to go late to the annual carnival, a mile down the street, at the high school playing field. Connie was too tired to go, but I agreed finally. We set off alone, father and daughter, hoping to see fireworks. There were none at the field, but then we went on rides, two violent up and down and spin around rides. The first was on rising and falling arms with rotating pods on the end, in one of which we sit, and it is fun at first, but as it speeds and the whiplash swoops and whirls have me on the edge of panic, and I'm waving to the operator kid to stop out of fear of my own blacking out, comes the swoosh! and I'm out of total control and god knows how many Gs slamming your guts and heart and muscles all back against your body cavity, and then another, my god, another, and holding Ruth for fear of its effects on her, and her I don't like this, daddy, and then getting off, at long last, staggering, shaking, dizzy . . . then into fun house, then up on the ferris wheel which was gentle, then one last ride, on what Ruth called bumper cars next to the whoosher whirl. We waited for a place on these, and the ride didn't look violent, but when we get in . . . it's the whole thing all over, same as the first ride, nightmare and torture on top of the muscle and organ memory of the first and we can't stop it, can't get off, fear being sick, fear blacking out again. When it's over, we stagger home nauseous, vowing never, never again. As for me, the rides remind me too much of the things being done and happening to us in our lives. I feel lost.

Gs. Science fiction first. Nearly coincident with news of Sputnik, the 1958 movie, "From the Earth to the Moon," impressed me with its nightmare images, as terrible to me then at age 17 as images of skull-distorting birth, of astronauts (unlike Flash Gordon or Captain Video or any previous movie travellers into space), slammed into seats by rocket thrusts, their faces pulled down and back, screaming, lips pulled back, as if the flesh would split, eyes

pulled back, blood streaking from mouths and noses, bodies crushed, all blacking out; then rockets quit; and one by one, the astronauts recover, faces back to normal, eyelids flutter, groans, bodies stir, cognizance, seats back upright. In the 1865 Jules Verne novel, which I had read at age 13, and on which the film was based, a projectile with three men inside is shot from Earth towards the moon by a huge mortar.

The film adds V2 footage and the image of a multi-finned rocket ship, but otherwise closely follows the archaic speculations of the novel. In Verne's prose, as the astronauts revive, they doubt that they are moving; they may still be "resting on the soil of Florida." Heat, "produced by friction on the atmosphere" is the first clue they are in space. They unbolt window hatches, see stars, nearly collide with a meteorite, eventually sight the moon, then the Earth: "that little thread; that silver crescent." The conditions of free-fall remain unanticipated either by book or by film.

An avid teen reader of paperback sci-fi, I was distracted and even offended by the scientific speculations of Arthur C. Clarke, whose spaceships weren't bullet-shaped or streamlined, but ugly and sprawling, and who imposed the rigor of physics on dreams of upward rocket flight. Instead of accelerating straight up, a moon rocket would have to angle into orbit, circle the Earth, and using the Earth's gravity for a slingshot effect, accelerate from orbit to an escape velocity of 24,245 mph. Interplanetary ships and space-stations would be assembled in space, free of atmosphere and gravity. At the time, Clarke's insistence on debunking our conventional fantasies and updating them according to Einsteinian physics countered rather than captured my imagination.

Stanley Kubrick's 1968 film, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, was based on Clarke's speculations (Clarke co-authored the screenplay), as well as on discoveries from the space race. We had seen the film clips now of mice and chimps in space, floating, wired with sensors. From 1961, we had seen footage of twenty or more manned flights, showing man living and functioning in space. We'd seen instantaneous TV transmissions from orbit, heard the delay of crackly voices, seen pens and food packets floating out of reach, the astronauts' gymnastic somersaults. We'd seen space walks, astronauts suited with umbilicals. We'd seen the slightest touch propelling by reaction, like echoing sound.

Earthbound, Kubrick attempted vignettes of weightlessness, of velcro-soled shoes, of a zero gravity toilet, and of rotating space stations and rotating chambers that provided artificial gravity, with ups and downs. But the most

haunting sequence, for me, was when space-suited Frank left his one-man service pod, to glide, weightless, across to repair a communications antenna on the Jupiter ship; his abandoned pod, meanwhile, controlled by HAL, the psychotic central computer, moved to attack him from behind. Suddenly, from Dave's point of view inside the Jupiter ship, we saw Frank's struggling figure catapulted past the window, oxygen hoses cut, and cartwheeling, dwindling and slowly disappearing into infinite space.

A year later, July 20, 1969, we saw Apollo 11's manned moon landing in real time on television. Neil Armstrong, protected by a space suit, descended from the lunar module, pulled a cord, opening the lens of a TV camera, and reaching the surface, rasped, "One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind." Buzz Aldrin, who had been a teenage grease monkey with my brother Jack in high school, climbed down next. The two astronauts went bounding through the moon dust at one-sixth G, dreamlike, as if they wore seven league boots. They gave us photographs from a new perspective of the distant Earth.

In recent years we've grown accustomed to watching, hearing, and reading about astronauts in orbiting space stations and space shuttles. Living in Zero G for weeks at a time, they tell us: "It's a very free and joyous feeling You float. Floating is so extraordinary." Space shuttles don't have chairs. In Zero G, people go into a semi-sitting position, and look as if they are sitting on invisible furniture. Body fluids move up toward the chest and head, making faces puff up and cheeks go higher, hands swell. Long hair needs to be held in place. Bones grow weaker; muscles shrink. Humans stretch in space, growing inches taller. Astronauts sleep on padded boards with an attached sleeping bag. Weightlessness, they say, makes you feel as if you have the softest imaginable pillow and mattress.

The weight of time, noses thickening, ears elongating, faces sagging. Shoulders stooped. Stomachs and breasts sagging, buttocks sagging. 40, 50, 60, 70 years of weight, down pulling, down pulling, against our climb away, the force of steps, of lift. The nightly truce, of weight's surrender, lying flat (odd fact in 18th century, that Franklin, Jefferson, Washington and company slept sitting up).

As a college freshman, I memorized the tenets of quantum mechanics, without hope of understanding. Sir Issac Newton: "All objects have a gravitational pull on one another." The strength of attraction, what we call "weight," is determined by the relative mass and distance between objects. The greater the mass, the greater the pull. Gravity bends beams of light. Gravity bends space itself. Collapsed stars create vortexes of gravity so intense that light cannot escape. Gravity is neither magnetism nor electricity. During my lifetime, we have built electromagnetic accelerators (I have wondered at the one at Stanford stretching for miles and miles), bombarded atoms and discovered smaller and smaller integers of matter, but gravity itself remains a mystery, like love.

Levity. Laughter. Levitation. Levitate. To rise. To make light of. Raised spirits. Risable. Comedy's lift, like a hot air balloon's. Resurrection. Erection.

The ship's hull ponderous, propped and cranked and craned, tonnage in drydock. Our strength is all gone into heaviness; that makes the weight.

A dream I remember from high school years is a dream of flying (my sister, on her own, also has dreamed of flying, she says). I practice by myself what everyone considers impossible. My arms are not feathered, but if I strain hard enough, I can compensate, for just an instant, for the lack of wing resistance by the furious flapping of my arms. I rise an inch, two inches, feel the unsteady suspension, then drop back down, exhausted. I keep practicing.

I tell my friends at school that I can fly, I can. Friends, bullies, girls, the disdainful and indifferent alike, all laugh. C'mon, no you can't.

Yes, I can. I'm telling you I can. Come on out to the football field and I'll show you.

Yeah, we gotta see this.

C'mon, Henry says he can fly. Gotta see this.

I'm ready in the endzone, facing them all crowded around the track. I start my routine, heart racing, knees loose, arms out. I smile at one friend, one face, Rudy, who is looking quizzical and worried. But then I get serious, lose him, lose myself. All their faces fall away, all sounds, cries, sneers, murmurs, gasps. I concentrate, concentrate. Flap my arms, hands loose: up, down, up, down, harder, faster; up, down. It happens, finally! Just a bit. Lifting free, off heels, off toes. My feet have the familiar tingling.

Bear down. Eyes closed, clenched. Total effort, absolute, my arm sockets and shoulder muscles straining, searing, but I concentrate, up, until I'm utter body, free of body, lost in action, pure against all nature, inching up, laboring, as high as their knees now, their waists, christ, as high as their heads! The work! But it is happening! Over their heads!

I am almost as high as the trees; almost, a little more, not quite. Higher, somehow, than I've ever thought, or meant to be. I am outside myself now, free of myself, at ease within my pain, marveling. There I am! Level with the third floor classrooms, gymnasium roof. I strain, but can't go higher. Can't last. Lapse, falter, my body thickens and grows ungainly, refusing to perform. I slow, struggling back. A little wobbly, side to side, afraid of dropping. Even with the crossbar on the goal posts, lower. My feet touch ground.

There! I look around proudly, hands propped on my knees, panting. I am drenched with sweat, coughing. My mind reels, eyes dazzle, pulse hammers. What do you think?

They look at me.

What 'there'? When do you start? You haven't even left the ground.

Oh, yeah. Laughing. Some flying. What a jerk. What a loon. Did you see the creep? See his face?

They turn and leave in disgust.

All but Rudy. He crouches close. Dreams, he says. Anyone can dream. Me, I'm a rich dude. I'm a lead singer. His whisper grows maniacal.

Mercutio's dying wisecrack: "Ask for me tomorrow, and you shall find me a grave man."

The yearning of these words, tethered to vanishing.